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Alice Learmont.

BY MISS MULOCK.

CHAPTER I.

"I WONDER at ye, Mistress Thomas Learmont. It's no canny to do sic a thing."

"What mean ye, my gudemither?" wearily answered the person addressed—a woman, young and gentle-looking. Her figure was wrapped in a coarse mantle of lowland plaid, and her head-dress was a humbly-fashioned imitation of that we see in the likenesses of Queen Mary Stuart. Still, fair womanhood transcends all quaintness of costume, and Mistress Thomas Learmont was very comely to behold.

"Gudemither's a coarse word; ye ought to say 'Dame Learmont' to your husband's mither," stiffly observed the ancient gentlewoman. "But I was gaun to speak to ye anent your wark there."

"Aweel!" softly said the younger lady—a lady in form and nature, though possibly not quite "a lady born." As she spoke, the color came into her face, and she looked with eyes wherein shone a heavenly light on her handiwork—the last crowning handiwork of her mother-joy. She had been banishing the cobwebs and dust from an old oaken cradle, and hiding its worm-eaten holes with white curtains tied with green.



ALICE LISTENED, AND SLOWLY THOUGHT OF THE STRANGE PENSIVENESS TO HER EYES.

"Ance mair, I must say, I wonder at ye," sharply repeated Dame Learmont.

The poor young creature looked troubled. "I wish ye'd tell me your mind, my leddy. I'm but a puir peasant lassie, and dinna ken a' ye ken."

"I said that when my son married ye. But ye needna greet, Marion—let bygones be bygones," added the old lady, growing more pacified. "It'll a' come right when I hae the bonnie bairn in my arms. And

that minds me o' what I was gaun to say. Ye foolish lassie, I marvel ye daur put on the wee cradle sic brows as these."

"What's wrang gudemither?"

"It's the green, Marion, the green," answered Dame Learmont, in a mysterious voice. "Wad ye put ae thing that's green near your bairn, and you a Grahame?"*

"I am no a Grahame now," said the young wife, with a gentle smile.

"But there's the old blude in ye still, ye canna change that (mair's the pity)," added the mother-in-law. "And if it were not sae, do ye no ken the blude o' whilk comes your husband?"

"Na, na," sighed the young woman, absently; and her ear was bent intently to catch every footfall that might reach the dilapidated chamber where they sat.

"Your husband, Marion Grahame, comes frae ane that nae mortal grave hauds this day. Did ye never hear o' True Thomas—Thomas Learmont—Thomas the Rhymer of Ercildown?"

* Green, the fairies' color, is always fatal to be worn, especially by the Grahames.

"Gude save us!" muttered Marion.

"Him that wounned into—the land ye ken o'—for seven lang years, and cama back; then was sent for by the gude folk, and never sain mair. Frae him, after many generations, came his namesake, Thomas Learmont, your bairn's father. And yet ye daur to tie the cradle wi' green!"

The old woman advanced and attempted with her feeble hands to undo the ill-omened ribbons, when a shadow passing the window—for it was twilight—made young Mrs. Learmont start and scream.

"Ye're a foolish lassie, flitched wi' ony thing. It's only Daft Simmie o' the hill at his sangs. Heer till him."

And the old woman, whose superstition seemed only to make her more strong and fearless—even in these days confessed ghost believers are often bolder than spiritual skeptics, who deny because they inwardly tremble to admit—the old woman grasped her daughter-in-law's arm and made her sit quiet, listening to the wild, but not unmusical boyish voice, singing fragments of a Border ballad:

"High upon Hiellands and laigh upon Tay,
Bonnie George Campbell rade out on a day.
He saddled, he bridled, and gallant rade he,
And hame came his gude horse—but never cam he!"

"Ch, gudemither!" cried the young wife at the latter ominous words; and once more she listened for footsteps, or horse's tramp.

"The gloaming's unco dark," Marion whispered: "the three tops o' Eildon Hill look like ane i' the mist. Isna my husband lang o' comin'?"

Haud your tongue, Mistress Thomas, ye're no fit for a Border wife. My son shall come and gang as it pleases him."

"Aweel, aweel," again patiently sighed the young creature, and played with the ribbons of the yet empty cradle, until the voice of Daft Simmie made her start once more.

It was other verses of the same ballad, sung in shrill tones just under the window.

"Out cam his mither dear, greeting fu' sair,
Out cam his bonnie bride, reiving her hair,
The meadow lies green, and the corn is unshorn,
But bonnie George Campbell will never return.

"He saddled, he bridled, and gallant rade he,
A plume in his helmet, a sword at his knee;
But hame cam his saddle, all bluidy to see,
And hame cam his gude horse—but never cam he!"

Hardly had ceased the song, which in gathering darkness sounded almost like an eldritch scream—when, as if in strange coincidence, the clatter of a horse's hoofs came nearer and nearer.

"It's himsel, it's himsel!" cried the young wife, as she leant out of the window, beneath which the animal apparently stopped.

He stopped—the good roan—the last valuable possession of the impoverished Learmonts—stopped of his own accord, for he was riderless!

A wild scream of despair burst from the unfortunate Marion, and she was carried into her chamber insensible. Ay, even to a mother's throes.

Dame Learmont was of the ancient race of Border women, fearless as the men; she uttered no shriek, even when she saw that her son was missing; such things were common enough in those days. The descendants of True Thomas had changed from scers and rhymers into men of warfare; Ishmaelites, whose hand was against many, and many a hand lifted perpetually against them. The mother guessed what had happened—that in some sudden fray Learmont had been thrown from his horse, wounded or—though even her bold spirit quailed at the latter fear—dead.

"He gaed ower Eildon Hill this morn," mused she; "and at noon there cam by Willie o' the Muir, wi' Geordie Grahame, Marion's cousin, that bears her husband nae gude

will. If they hae foughten there'll be bluid on the roan. I'll gang and see."

She left her daughter-in-law's couch and went near the horse, who still stood under the window, shivering in every limb, his mouth and flanks white with foam. But there were on him neither wounds nor blood; his accoutrements were not disordered; and except for the overwhelming terror that seemed to possess him, there had evidently come no harm to the animal. Nay, even the small burdens fastened to his back were safe; as well as a leathern pouch of money that had been thrust under the pommel of the saddle.

"Geordie Grahame or Willie Muir wadna hae passed this by," ironically said Dame Learmont. "It must be o' his ain will that my son stays. Yet's that no likely, considering his puir wife in her trouble; and this being Hogmanay nicht too—an eerie and awsome nicht to be abroad."

As the mistress spoke, some of the farm servants trembled and looked over their shoulders, while others examined the horse's disordered mane and tail.

"Maybe they hae been riding him—the wee folk. Eh, neighbors, look ye here," whispered one man, showing in the good roan's mane the knots which are called elf-locks, and are supposed to be plaited by the fairies, who often have a mind to ride on mortal coursers.

Dame Learmont's eyes glittered, as if she felt more pride than dread in the uncanny reputation belonging to her family.

"It's likely eneuch," she said mysteriously. "The 'gude neighbors' will be abroad this nicht, as we a' ken; and my son Thomas bears his great ancestor's christened name. It is maybe nae mortal wark that keeps him sae lang frae hame."

"Gude save us! Lord hae mercy upon us!" cried the servants in various tones of fright, eyeing their mistress with considerable distrust.

But though she evidently had no dislike to bear the credit of supernatural powers, still she was not disregarding of all human means that could explain the absence of her son.

She called the farm followers and questioned them closely, but none could give any information.

"Ye see," the brave old lady added, driven at last to circumstantial evidence, "nae harm can hae befa'en him. He wasna fechtin', or he wad hae stickit close to Red Roan. An' he hasna been torn fra the saddle, but has lichted doun o' his ain accord. Na, na, sirs; there was surely ne'er a fray."

Her resolute voice was answered by an idiotic whine behind the crowd; and immediately afterward Daft Simmie broke out in one of his queer, quavering songs:

"There were twa lads fechtin' on Eildon Hill,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hoodie craw;
The tane the tither's bluid did spill,
Ho! ho, says the hoodie craw."

"There's meanin' in it," whispered the servants. "There's aye a meanin' in Daft Simmie's sangs, and he sees sights the whilk nane ither folk can see."

But the stout-hearted mistress reproved them, and catching hold of the lad, tried to compel him to plain speech. It was in vain; Simmie was either too foolish or too wise. Not another word could be got out of him, and soon the "gudemither" was summoned back from her inquiries concerning her son to the more imminent peril of his wife.

It was just betwixt the night and the day, at the precise hour which forms the boundary mark of the old and new year, that the child came into the world; a remarkable period of birth, being the hour at which, according to the superstitions of many countries, the unseen world of spiritual beings are supposed to have most power. At any other time, the "auld wives" might have been struck by this fact; but now the whole household was smitten with such deep grief and confusion, that no one noted so unimportant an invent as the birth of a child to the man whom they were beginning to conjecture had been that day murdered. Truly, had it been a boy, the unhappy young mother might well have christened her new-born "*Ben-oni*"—"the son of my

* It is counted unlucky to mention the fairies or Fairyland by name.

sorrow." But she had not even the comfort of knowing it to be a son, born to avenge his father; it was, as the indignant Dame Learmont expressed it—"nae lad-bairn: just a puir, wee, skirling lassie."

It was put into the cradle—where the green ribbons still remained—the old grandmother was too busy and excited to heed them now. There the poor little morsel of humanity lay; while Dame Learmont, now somewhat at rest respecting her duties to mother and child, began to arrange a plan for finding out, dead or alive, her lost son.

Marion hindered her little, for the poor girl had never recovered her right wits. She lay in a dreamy unconsciousness until the child began to cry out from its little cradle. Then her poor white lips found speech.

"Gie me the bairn," she murmured; "Gie me *my* bairn."

It was touching, the emphasis on the "my"—the first instinct of possession. I have heard women and mothers say that this instinct, dawning at such a time, was the most delicious joy they had experienced during life.

"Gie me my bairn," again wailed the half-unconscious Marion; and the child was given to her.

"Ye needna mak sic a girning and greeting ower it," muttered the old woman; probably embittered beyond her wont by suppressed anxiety concerning her son. "It's no anither Thomas Learmont. It's only a lassie."

Marion took no heed. She lay with her white fluttering fingers pressed near the baby's face, talking sleepily to herself.

"Mither, mither, are ye there?"

"Ay, ay, lass," answered Dame Learmont; but a moment's observation showed her that the sick girl's thoughts were not with her at all.

"My mither, my ain mither," continued Marion, feebly; "I ken ye're thinking o' me now, though ye're lying cauld under the mools. Ye are glad it is a lass-bairn; and sae am I. I'll call it by your ain name; it's a bonnie name—Alice—my bairn Alice."

There sounded something supernatural in these wanderings of a bewildered mind. The old woman stood aside, watching with a vague awe the countenance of her daughter-in-law, who seemed talking to the air; and that of the newborn babe who lay staring out into vacancy, as young infants do; its wide-open eyes wearing that strange look which seems as if infants saw things which others could not see.

"It's an uncanny time, and maybe there are uncanny things about them baith," said Dame Learmont to herself, in a frightened whisper.

But before her fear could increase, she was roused by the sound of many feet and voices. She looked down into the court-yard, and there saw the people of the farm clustered in a group round what, by the light of the lantern, seemed—no living man, but a drowned body!

The mother's heart, hard, yet still a mother's, recoiled at the spectacle. She strained her feeble sight; it was well; for now she had strength to see that the dead man was not clad like her son.

Yet this might only be a delusion. She had just prudence enough not to betray anything to the young mother, who now seemed falling into a doze; she took the infant away, laid it in the cradle beside the bed, and then hastily went out, leaving the door ajar.

Now, here, my wise, anti-superstitious reader, I must request you to pause. What I am about to tell, you will find quite incredible and hard to be understood. I shall not stop to argue with you at all. I shall only say that this, my chronicle, is a consistent chronicle of its kind, the like of which, stoutly verified by the peasants, may be found in Nithsdale, Galloway, and indeed all along the Scottish border. I do but revivify in a more complete and connected form the fragments of lore attested concerning a race of beings whose peculiarities may truly be considered to belong to pre-historic annals.

Marion Learmont was lying quite still, in a state of entire exhaustion, which, however, was rather pleasant than other-

wise, as if a lulling spell had been cast upon her. Her eyes were half-open, and she indistinctly saw the room—a large ghostly chamber, dimly lighted by the wood-fire only; for her mother-in-law had taken away the lamp. She was certain that she was awake, for she noticed the several bits of furniture—the oaken chair, the sole remnant of worldly gear which she herself had brought into the family on her marriage—the rude table and the curtained top of her baby's cradle. She even observed the snow lying in a thin drift along the margin of the window-panes, stealing half-melted through, forming a large round globule of water which rested on the great Bible that was placed on the window-sill.

Gradually the red embers smouldered into darkness, and the shadow, cast from the door standing ajar, grew blacker and wider. All at once she heard a buzzing, whispering, and laughing; a noise not loud, but very sweet. Soon the ghostly-looking shadowy corners were full of moving light. It came from faces peeping in at the door. Then a troop of little creatures entered one after the other, thick and fast, until the whole room was full of them.

They seemed at first like very beautiful children. But as Marion looked again, she saw they were perfect little men and women, exquisitely formed, and gracefully dressed in airy robes of all colors—especially green. The youths were armed with quivers made of bright adders'-skin, and arrows of reed. The maidens had long yellow hair, fastened back from their shining brows with combs of gold. Many, both men and women, had their heads adorned with the flower called fairy-cap, or with white convolvuluses. Every one of them was fair to look at, but chiefly the first who had entered, a lady taller than the rest, who wore a crown either of diamonds or dew-drops; Marion thought that never was there a coronet so glittering, lucid and clear.

The tiny visitors had brought no visible torches, but somehow the whole room about them grew light wherever they tripped. And they tripped about everywhere, in the merriest, most fantastic round, continually following the tallest lady, who came on more softly and gravely than the rest.

Then Marion knew that these were elves, and that this was the Queen of Fairies who had loved and carried away her husband's ancestor, Thomas the Rhymer, of Ercildoun.

It was very strange, but though she seemed to guess all this as by a sort of intuition, she felt not in the least afraid. The sight was so dazzling, so delicious; its glamour changed the dark old chamber into a fairy palace. She herself, though seemingly without the power or desire of speech, had no sense of physical or mental pain—no grief concerning her husband, no terror for her child. She lay and listened in a sort of spell-bound delight to the little people, as they talked, danced, and sang, glittering hither and thither like a swarm of luminous gnats.

At last the Queen of Fairies, making a large circuit round the window to avoid the "big ha' Bible," which lay there—came and stood beside the baby's cradle.

Now, alas! the young mother knew what her elfin majesty was come about. But the knowledge was vain; Marion received it in her mind without being terrified in her heart. All human feelings or affections seemed to have grown cold in the ecstatic delight of the fairy-show.

"It's a fine bairn, and a bonnie bairn—very!" said, in quite intelligible and most enchanting accents, the lady who had been True Thomas' love. "The Learmonts have not grown uglier in all these years—that is hundreds of years—we forgot that we are on earth just now," she continued, sententiously, as ascending gracefully an extempore staircase obediently framed of the arms and legs of fairy-squires, she reached the top of the cradle, and sat down right in front of the babe's blue eyes—which, however, were fast closed.

"What very sleepy things mortal infants are, my ladies," observed her majesty. "I wonder whether she will wake when we get her to Fairyland?"

At this some slight pang of maternal dread smote Marion's heart. She tried to cry out, but just then the fairy-lady turned upon her her diamond eyes, glittering and gay,

which looked as if they never had wept—could weep—or had need to weep. Their steely brightness froze up all the tears that were pressing under the eyelids of the mortal mother, born a woman, and as a woman made to know suffering.

"Behold her," said the fairy, laughing with a sharp, clear, bell-like mirth; "she is afraid! She thinks we would harm the wee thing! Not we! No, Mistress Thomas Learmont (a fine name that, but nothing like so fine as the first man who bore it)," and the little lady heaved a sigh, which seemed so light as to be only a pause in her mirth. "No, Mistress Thomas, I'll do your child no harm; if only for the love I bear to your husband's people, especially this great ancestor and himself—ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the fairy troop, with a merry meaning, and pointed out of the window. There, even through the darkness, Marion fancied she saw the white waves of the Tweed foaming and dashing, and the gray mists floating almost in human shapes over the triple summit of Eildon Hill.

"For the love I bear your husband," continued the Elf-queen, "I will even let you see your bairn on her birth-night every year for three years, and then once in every seven, according as she chooses; a fair bargain."

"A very fair bargain!" chorused the delighted little people.

But nature in the mother's heart was stronger than even the glamour that was over her. Though unable to speak, she stretched imploring hands. The blithe troop only mocked her, hovering over her bed like a swarm of bees, and dinning her ears with their melodious songs. Once she tried to raise herself and get nearer to her sleeping babe, but invisible hands, soft and cold, like those of dead children, held her back; and the fairy-lady, sitting upon the top of the cradle, laughed at her, making elfin grimaces which sent all the rest into a titter that rung through the room like the sound of the wind through a cluster of waving rushes.

"It's useless, Marion Learmont; you must just lie still and dree your weird; and this is not the only weird that waits ye. Quick—quick—my people! the gudewife will be back soon."

While she spoke the poor mother saw the elves take up her child, who wakened at once. The queen looked at her with her great black eyes, and instantly a gleam of strange intelligence came into those of the hour-born babe.

"She'll do; she's a bonnie one; there is not her like in all Elfland. Haste!—got her ready."

Instantly two or three motherly-looking fairies, wearing respectable silken robes and heather-bell caps, advanced, and slipping off the child's wrappings, left it a little soft lump of beauty, fit even for the caresses of a fairy.

"A sweet wee pet, and fortunately not christened yet; so she shall be altogether ours, and we will find her a name in Fairyland."

But here the mother uttered what seemed to herself a heart-piercing shriek, but which was in fact only a low murmur of "Alice—Alice."

"Very well, if it so please you, my good woman; I am quite satisfied. My elves, call her Alice," answered the Queen of Fairies, bending with a grace as winning as when she met the first Thomas Learmont under Eildon-tree.

"Alice—Alice!" chanted out all the "wee folk," in a chorus ravishing sweet. It was broken by a noise far less delicious and more mundane—the sharp, clattering voice of Dame Learmont. At the sound the light in the chamber vanished; there was a rustling and murmuring, which at last ended in a faint shout of eldrich laughter—then silence.

The mother-in-law coming in, found her patient in an agony of grief.

"What for do ye greet, lassie? ye ought to thank God and sing for joy."

"My bairn! my bairn!"

"Ne'er fash yourself about it; the ill-faured wean. Think

o' your husband that is alive, and Geordie Grahame died. They twa had a sair tussle for 't, Daft Simmie says, for he saw them; Geordie fell intil the Tweed, and was washit up to our door-stane. But, I doubt not, my ain laddie's safe and awa."

"Far awa, far awa," groaned the poor mother. "And my bonnie bairn's gane too."

"Ye're daft or dreaming, Marion. Here's the bit thing soun' asleep."

She rocked the cradle rather roughly, but there was no cry or stirring from within. The little cap lay turned faceward on the pillow; there were the outlines of the form, carefully wrapped up so as to resemble a sleeping infant. But what was the grandmother's horror when she lifted it up and found—no living child, but a piece of wood, rudely carved into something like humanity, and dressed in the clothes of baby Alice.

"It's ane of Simmie's images—he has been at his deil's wark, and stown away the bairn," cried the old woman, as frantically she quitted the room to set on foot a search for the missing child.

But whether this supposition was true, or whether, as the grief-stricken mother firmly believed, the fairies had carried away her darling, certain it was that all search proved vain, and neither Thomas Learmont nor little Alice could be found.

CHAPTER II.

WHITE, and in long wavy wreaths, lay the snow on Eildon Hill. The new year was not an hour old, and yet all about the three peaks it was as bright as day. Many a hardy mountain ram started in its fold, and trembled to hear the silvery ringing of fairy bridles resounding in the night air.

Great sport was the Fairies' Raid. On they came—a goodly troop, flashing along the highroads, over the hedges and through the plowed fields; on elfin nags—black, chestnut, gray—whose hoofs left no mark on the smooth snow. Yet what with their prancing and singing and laughing, the fairy folk made as much noise as a company of living horsemen. But it was like sounds heard in a dream that fade the instant one awakens. And many a dreamer in Melrose that night heard such sounds, wondering whence they came.

"Heigho!" said the Queen of Fairies, as she reined in her palfrey at the spot where the triple-peaked hill divides. "Heigho! for my bonnie green wood, where I met True Thomas! It's all hewn down. Hardly would I know the upper world again. Very provoking! that people will plow and till, and turn waste-lands into meadows. They look much prettier as they are, do they not Counselor Kelpie?"

This was addressed to the water-sprite of that name, an ugly creature, half-man, half-brute, who had crept out of the shallows of the Tweed to fawn at her majesty's feet.

"Ay, ay," he answered; "and for my part, if folk keep on growing so prudent and clever, building bridges and boats, I will never get a living soul to drown."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the queen. "But, good Kelpie, have you kept safe the treasure I lent you—the youth that slew his fellow in an evil fray, and so fell into the fairies' power?"

"He is safe," answered the Kelpie, in a voice hollow as the waters rising in a well. He lies in an underground cave, through which my river oozily creeps. He will sleep there until his wounds are healed; and there will not even be one wet lock in his yellow hair when you find him resting by the streams of Fairyland. But, oh! queen; if you would but have let Kelpie have him!"

"Could not, my ancient friend! Quite impossible. His great ancestor is growing tiresome now, and we want a new mortal in Fairyland. Besides, soon will come the seventh year, when we must pay the teind to hell."

A low wail broke from the fairy troop at the mention

of this, the sole shadow on their perpetual joys—the tribute of one of their number exacted by the Archfiend every seven years.

But the pause was only momentary; for the elfin-race have an existence entirely soulless, free from human grief, affection or fear. Soon again were the silver bridles ringing merrily up the white hill-side.

"Where is my changeling? Where is the child?" cried the queen, suddenly stopping.

"Here, gracious majesty. A weary burden it is, too; human babies are so helpless and fat."

And a fairy lady toiled up, bearing before her on a palfrey the unlucky infant, who lay pale, cold and half-dead—a weight perfectly enormous for the elfin-steed to bear.

"Kanitha, guardian of the fairy youth, your salary shall be increased to four golden rods a year if you do your duty by my small friend here. What, ho! Alice, open your eyes."

The queen, dismounting, amused herself with poking her dainty fingers under the pale eyelids of the mortal babe, and playing with its frozen limbs, white as the snow on which they lay.

"Madam," observed a sage elf-lady, "it is a fact scarce worth bringing under your highness's notice, but nevertheless true, that earthly mothers are as foolish as to pay attention to their babes, swaddling them warmly, hugging them in their arms, and giving them nourishment from their own breast. We never think of such trouble in Fairyland. Nevertheless, unless something is done for this babe, your majesty will be disappointed in your sport, for the little thing will slip away in that curious fashion which mortals call *dying*. It's a trick they have."

"How very unpleasant," said the queen. But she had not time for more, when suddenly the chancicleer of some honest Tweedside farmer began to cry aloud; and far down Melrose village appeared dim lights creeping about like glow-worms. The world—the hard-working, patient, much enduring, yet happy world, was waking again to its New Year.

"We must begone, elves; we must begone!" Snatching wee Alice in her own regal arms, the Queen of Fairies stamped once, twice, thrice. Immediately the hill side was cloven, and a dark gate opened itself before her. Thither she passed with all her train. The earth closed behind them—leaving not a trace along the mountain heather, not a footstep in the snow.

But far—far through the underground passage went the merry elves, up and down, along and across; past valleys, plains, and mountains; through black and thundering rivers, by smooth lakes, and over seas. The little babe in its deathly stupor saw nothing of this: it lay immovable—its eyes sealed, until at last they opened on a green bank in Fairyland—Fairyland, which was like earth in its gayest aspects; a region of perpetual unvaried pleasure; a clime where there was neither summer or winter: a day which knew neither noon nor night; a sky in which was never seen either sun or cloud. So live the fair people; an intermediate race, created for neither earth, heaven, or hell.

Alice Learmont came to life again there. The little limbs stretched themselves out, the eyes opened, and the first sound she uttered was that with which we mortals enter into the world, and which we must utter at intervals, until we cease to suffer and to breathe together—a cry of pain and anguish.

It was quite new to fairy ears. All the little people stopped theirs, and bounded about in disquiet, doubtless thinking their mistress had brought a most unpleasant element into the elfin society. And when the unhappy changeling rolled its heavy head about, and helplessly stirred its fingers, they began to mock and sport with it, as being a creation so very much inferior to themselves.

"This will not do," said her elfin majesty, with dignity; "I had another intent on entering the door which Dame Learmont so kindly left ajar for me. I wished a babe, new-born, unchristened, who might receive with our teaching something of the elfin nature, and so be content always to

stay in Fairyland; for"—and her majesty shrugged her fair round shoulders, beautiful, though laden with gossamer wing-like appendages that might have been considered unbecoming in a mortal—"for it is a curious and altogether unaccountable fact that these human folk are never satisfied; and even my True Thomas has a hankering after the troubles of earth sometimes. As for his descendant—this wee lady's father—I vow I shall be scarcely able to keep him a year of his own free-will.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed the sympathetic elves, in token of their wonder and indignation.

"Now, my subjects, see what I intend to do; we'll turn this coarse bit of humanity into a creature something like ourselves. Behold!"

She touched the infant's head with the scepter, a silver lily—and soon the inanimate, meaningless form grew into the beauty of sense and consciousness. The eyes became quickened to distinguish objects, the lips seemed perfecting themselves into speech. It was the face of a grown person, or of a child prematurely wise.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the elf; she seemed to do nothing except laugh. "But we must have a body to match."

She passed her hand down the weak, shapeless limbs, and they expanded into delicate form. The little girl stood upright on her feet, a tiny, old-fashioned figure—less beautiful than the elves, for, though fair enough, she was no fairer than she would have been had she grown up as Alice Learmont of Tweedside;—a miniature woman, but, as her expression showed, gifted with little more than the understanding of a child.

"Well, my changeling, how do you feel? what do you want?"

"I'm hungry," said the little mortal.

"Eh! she's a low born lassie after all," cried the Queen of Fairies, turning up her roseleaf of a chin; "take her away, and feed her with milk from the fairy cows. I must go and see after my grown mortal, my braw young Thomas Learmont."

A fairy life they led in Fairyland, where a day lengthened out to the pleasures of a year, and a year glided past as easily and happily as a single day. Alice Learmont was as one of them; sprung at once from babyhood to maturity—at least the only maturity the fairies ever knew; for their existence was like that of perpetual childhood, without its sorrows. They suffered not, because to feel is to suffer, and they never felt; all their life was sport, and all their sport was unreal glamour. Nevertheless, they were merry elves, and the little child who would else have spent its first year of babyhood sleeping on its mother's breast, was the very cynosure of all elfin eyes.

"So you seem satisfied enough with yourself, my little Princess Royal of Fairyland," said Kanitha, the fairy pedagogue-ess. "You have looked at your large image long enough in that stream. Truly you are growing quite a coarse child of earth, and very like your mother."

"What is a mother?"

"A thing, my little lady, to be all that I am to you—in the way of feeding and rearing you. But you will see for yourself to-morrow, for it is your birthday, and our merry mistress will send you home for an hour."

Alice began to cry.

Now crying was an original and hereditary accomplishment which the little mortal had, and which was quite unknown in Fairyland.

Whenever she set up a wail—which she did in true baby fashion—the elves immediately stopped their ears and skipped away.

Therefore, before the changeling had screamed for a minute, she found herself lying alone amid the remnants of the feast and the musical instruments of the dancers.

Even a vocal concert, that was being carried on in a large water-lily leaf, had ceased; the performers, six aquatic elves and their tutor, an ancient frog, having dived under the bulrushes, in agony at being outdone in their own profession by a mere amateur.

Alice lay and sobbed—it might have been until evening; but there is no twilight in Fairyland—no dawn, nor close of day; all is one unvaried brightness—a changeless song—a shadowless picture.

As the child lay pulling the daisies—that, as she pulled them, sprouted again—trying in how musical tones she could cry, there fell across her a dark shade.

Now the elves are small and have no shadow, therefore this stranger could not have been of their race. And when he spoke it was not in the speech of Fairyland, but with an accent quite new to Alice. Yet it thrilled her with an instinct of pleasure.

"Wherefore greet ye, Alice Learmont? Hae ye any sorrow."

"What is sorrow?—I do not know. I'm crying to amuse myself," answered the little creature, as she looked boldly up at her questioner.

He was a tall man—past middle age—of grand and stately mien. His lips, close set, seemed as if they rarely opened; for it was on them that the kisses of the Fairy Queen had left the wondrous spell that they could utter nothing but truth. He was the wondrous Seer—the Prophet who never foretold falsely—the Bard before his age—Thomas of Ercildoun.

Many generations had passed, since, following the mysterious hart and hind which came as his summoners, True Thomas had vanished from earth; and yet he still abode in Elfland, with the same aspect that he had worn when dwelling at Ercildoun and walking on Eildon Hill.

"Did ye never hear tell o' sorrow, Alice? Then the Learmonts o' this day are aye happier than in my time. But I mind that ye are a new-born wean, just snatched frae mither's breast. Ye'll gang back to earth the morn!"

His voice was pensive, and the light of his eye sad; but Alice gamboled about, as unheeding as a young fawn of the wilderness.

It was the hour when all grew quiet and lonely in Fairyland—for the elfin people were abroad working their merry wiles on the midnight earth. At that time Alice was always used to fold up her little limbs and go to sleep like a flower—for only flowers slept in Elfland. Thus drooped she, regardless of the presence of the stranger, and indifferent to his anxious speech. He watched her a long time silently, and then tried to arouse her.

"Waken, Alice Learmont! it's brief time that I hae for speech wi' the youngest o' my race. Tell me, bairn, how thing are in my ain countrie? Rins the Tweed clear as ever, and does the sun glint as red ower bonnie Melrose?"

He sighed, but Alice only laughed. "I know little about it, old man; will you leave me to sleep?"

"Sleep?" said he, "Sleep?—when ye are gaun hame to your mither, and your father lies sae near that ye might hear the soun' o' his breathing—every breath a sigh! Lassie, lassie, look ye here?"

He lifted the child in his arms, and carried her to a river side. There bedded in the weeds and rushes, lay a stalwart form, deathlike, yet alive. Water efts and bright-tinted fishes were sporting over the large limbs; blue forget-me-nots grew up and twisted themselves in natural garlands among the yellow hair. The decaying garments were dropping off from the manly chest, which yet heaved in regular respirations. He who thus lay motionless, yet living, bound by elfin spell, was the younger Thomas Learmont.

"I'm wae to see ye, my son," softly said the Rhymer. "Why will ye gainsay them that it's vain to gainsay?—It's no hard to live here in Elfland."

The youth turned and muttered as if in sleep—"I canna loe strange women, and I wad fain gang hame to my wife Marion."

Thomas of Ercildoun sat down and covered his face with his robe, in sorrow, perhaps even in shame.

Meanwhile the sportive infant leaped from him, and paddling among the rushes, climbed up and sat astride on the form of the spell-numbed man, crowing aloud with glee.

"Alice, the 'gude neighbors' hae made ye like themselves," said the old Seer, mournfully. "Else ye wadna be

sae light o' heart beside your puir father, nor when ye are sune to be creeping to your mither's breast."

"Is that as pleasant as playing among the flowers, or dancing in the grand halls here?" cried the little changeling, making queer grimaces, and comporting herself in all things like a soulless elf. The Rhymer lifted his voice in anger, when a low murmur of reproach arose from the younger Thomas.

"It's just a puir bit wean, a twalmonth auld! Alice, gang back to your mither, and then she'll mind o' me."

The little child paused a minute, as if some natural instinct, awakened by her father's voice, were at work within her. But soon she relapsed into her gambols, and then, pausing to listen, clapped her baby hands.

"They are coming—the beautiful elves. I'm away, old man, away to my playmates."

Thomas the Rhymer looked up. There were clouds of dust, and behind them a gallant company—the same that in the days of his youth he had seen pass along the greenwood side. It was, he knew, daybreak on earth, and the "good neighbors" were speeding back to Fairyland. He stole away from his descendant, in alarm and shame, lest his compassion should work him ill; and went forth to meet his elfin mistress, for whose sake he had forsaken earth and all its ties for evermore.

CHAPTER III.

I TELL ye, gudemither, it was nae dream. I saw her—I felt her—my bonnie doo—my sweet lassie—my ain bairn! She was wi' me this ae nicht—ay, i' these arms."

So sobbed out Marion Learmont, as she sat in breathless sorrow beside her wheel, by which she and her husband's mother earned their daily bread—two desolate women.

"The Lord keep ye in your wits, dochter, and forgie ye sic fancies! Puir lassie, ye're a widow and childless, like my ain sel. For it's ower certain that your gudeman was drowned in the Tweed—and Daft Simmie—de'il take him! has stown awa' your bairn. Ye'll ne'er see tane nor tither mair."

"Gudemither, I will!" said the girl solemnly. "There's mony a ane brought back frae the wee folk; and my bairn's alive, for I hae seen her not four hours syne."

The old woman shook her head, but there was something so earnest in Marion's manner that she seemed rather less incredulous.

"Tell a' the truth, lassie. It'll do nae harm."

"It was i' the mirk o' night, just afore moonrise; I waukened, sabbin' because o' a dream I had, that my puir bairn was sleeping at my side;—and I felt a wee bit cheek, saft and warm, creepin'—creepin' till me! It was a wean, gudemither! It was my Alice!"

"Gude guide us!"

"She lay here at my breast, wi' her sweet lips close, and drank, and drank—or it seemed sae. I tell ye, this ae nicht I hae gi'en mither's milk to my dear bairn."

"It's a' the wark o' the Evil Ane," whispered Dame Learmont. "But, Marion, lass in what form gaed she awa? In a flash o' fire, nae doubt?"

"Ye speak ill, gudemither" cried the young creature, tried past her patience. "It's nae deil's wark—it's the wee folk that hae changed my bairn, as I tell't ye."

The old woman shook her head with incredulous pity. She did not like that any who were not strictly of the Learmont blood should attain to the honors of fairy intercourse. Still, as Mistress Thomas persisted, she grew more acquiescent.

"Maybe, Marion; but then the bairn could be naething but a wee deil—a changeling."

"I tell ye she was my ain bairn."

"The new-born waen ye scarce set e'en on?"

"Na, na; but a bonnie lassie—a twalmonth auld, as she wad be this day?"

"Ance mair," said Dame Learmont, mysteriously, "ance mair, I ask—how did she gang?"

"I dinna ken," sobbed Marion. "I was sleeping soun',

and she slippit awa' frae my arms like a snaw-wreath, and was gane. Wae's me for my bonnie, bonnie bairn!"

Thus sorrowed the forsaken mother, more, perhaps, as a mother than a wife; for certainty, the slayer of hope is oftentimes the healer of despair—and she, as well as the whole country side, believed that Thomas Learmont had been drowned in the Tweed and washed out to sea. But nothing ever shook Marion in her statement that she had seen her babe carried away by fairies. And when the strange story, which she told on the first anniversary after her loss, was repeated the next year and the next, people began to look on her with awe and respect, not unmingled with a sort of dread.

On the third New Year's eve the young widow—as she believed herself to be—was sitting in the large room which, in the days of the Learmonts, had been the well-furnished farmer's kitchen. It was now desolate enough, for the two women—relics of the last two of the race—were very poor. On this winter night, Dame Learmont, sick and ailing, had been taken to the charity of some far-away kin; but Marion refused to quit her home. There she sat, heavily turning her wheel by the light of one half-burnt fagot, shivering with cold, listening to the howling of wind and rain; or, perhaps—so strangely thrilled was her mother's heart—listening for some other sound which she hoped would come.

"I winna try to sleep," she said to herself. "I'll bide, and see what this year brings."

So she sat and hearkened, but heard nothing save the burring of her wheel and the noise of the storm without, until between twelve and one, the hour that marked the boundary of the old and new year. Then, in a pause of the rain, Marion fancied she heard a faint knock at the door.

"Come ben," she said, thinking it was a neighbor belated, and sorrowful that the hour of her accustomed joy had passed by.

"I cannot come ben, unless ye open to me."

It was a child's voice; yet at once sharper and sweeter than a child's. Could it come from these soft, but always dumb lips, that had clung to her bosom yearly at this time?

Trembling, Marion tottered across the room and unlatched the door. There in the bleak night stood a little shivering child, dressed in a tattered cloak, with its arms all bare and drenched with rain. Alas! it did not look like her fairy child; but, nevertheless, the kind woman drew it in.

"Puir wee lassie, what gars ye stay out sae late? Hae ye nae minnie at hame? What for do ye greet sae sair?"

But the child made no answer, for no sooner had she been lifted over the threshold than her crying was changed into a shout of laughter. The old rags dropped from her, and she stood in the center of the dark, miserable room, a lovely three years' child, dressed in the shining robes of Fairyland.

"It's my bairn, it's my bairn," cried the mother, as regardless of the wondrous glitter and supernatural aspect of the visitor, she ran to clasp her. But the little thing flitted from her and escaped.

"Are ye no my ain? Will ye no come to me?" sobbed Marion, in agony. But Alice only laughed the more, and gamboled about the house without noticing her.

"Alice, Alice," shrieked the mother, following.

"Ay, I'm Alice. What do you want?"

This was all the child said, and continued her play. But the mother had at length heard the sound of her daughter's voice. The little one had even for the first time answered to the name "Alice." It was joy enough, and too much; Marion Learmont fell on her knees, and weeping, thanked God.

While she murmured her prayer, the changeling's wild sports and laughter were momentarily hushed; and a faint, sweet shadow of earth stole over the elfin brightness of her countenance. She came up softly, and said:

"What are you doing that for?"

"For thankfu' joy, that He may bless ye and save ye, my bairn," cried Marion, ceasing her prayer in the delight of embracing her child.

But no sooner had she risen from her knees, and tried by tender force to hold her darling fast, than Alice slipped away, and laughed, and mocked, and played strange, elfish antics, even until the mother's self was terrified. She began to weep, not now for joy, but for very sorrow. The changeling only jested the more.

"How dull and queer you seem, big, dark-looking woman of earth! and what coarse clothes you wear, and what an ugly place this is! Where are your pretty gold tables, and shining clothes, and beautiful dancing-halls?"

"I hae nane, my bairn; I am but a puir woman, that live my lane in poortith and care. But I wadna grieve, gin I had but ye, my dochter!"

And once more Marion tried to draw to her arms the bright being who looked like a child and spoke like a denizen of fairyland. For a minute or two Alice stayed, seemingly amused by the novelty of caresses.

"What are you doing to me?" she cried.

"I haud ye fast, my darling; and I gie ye ae kiss, and anither—and anither," answered the mother, fearlessly pressing her lips to the soft hair that was bound with the garlands and redolent of the perfumes of Elfland. I loe ye, my bairn; I loe ye!"

"What does that mean?"

"Do ye no ken? Did ye never hear o' love in Fairyland? Oh, then come hame, Alice; come hame!" sighed the mother, in passionate entreaty. But perpetually the bright creature escaped her clasp.

For an hour, which seemed a moment, yet an age, Marion Learmont watched the gambols of her elfin child flitting about the desolate house. Awe-struck, she crouched beside where the fire had been, and heard strange shouts of invisible laughter echoing Alice and mocking herself. At last, the house seemed to grow stiller, and Marion felt a drowsy oppression creeping over her. The changeling, too, as if tired out with play like a mortal child, had laid herself down, and suffered the mother to fold her in her arms. Thus secure, Marion yielded to irresistible weariness and fell asleep.

In the cold dawn she woke, but it was to stretch out her empty arms and moan. The child was gone. All over the house was silence, solitude, and gloom. Only, tinkling in her brain was a sort of musical rhyme, which seemed like a tune heard in dreams of just in the act of waking, and remembered afterward. It had little connected meaning; yet still the mere words clung tenaciously to her memory:

"Prayer o' faith is an arm o' airn;
—Whilk will ye hae, spouse or bairn?"

While amid her frantic lamentations the wife of Thomas Learmont paused to think over this rhyme, the first ray of daylight glinted into the room and rested on a relic belonging to her husband's family.

It was a portrait blackened with smoke and age, yet now the face seemed to grow defined, even life-like.

She could have fancied that the eyes turned toward her with a human expression of pity and gentle sadness. And she shuddered, remembering what awful tales were told of that picture, the portrait of her husband's wondrous ancestor, Thomas the Rhymer.

She closed her eyes in terror, nor opened them again till, in broad daylight, she saw it was only a picture on the wall.

CHAPTER IV.

FAR up the Eildon Hill there were footmarks in the New Year snow: small light traces, as if some poor barefooted child had been there wandering through the night. But when the marks reached the Eildon Tree, they vanished suddenly and were no more seen.

The mortal child was once more in her home in Fairyland. She awoke, as if out of a sleep or trance, and found herself lying on the green sward, in the warm light of that sunless day. She stretched her limbs with delight, and drank in the pleasant air.

"Oh! this is happy," she said, and began once more to revel among the flowers.

She was alone, but that mattered little in Elfland, where all sought their own pleasure, and such a thing as sympathy was unknown. It troubled her when she saw coming over the valley toward her that tall shadow, grave and pale, who ever met her after her yearly visits to earth.

Alice tried to escape, and hid herself among the willows of the stream; but her laugh betrayed her, when, looking down, she saw a brave sight and a merry—at least, so the elf-child thought.

There was the figure of a spell-bound man, the sport of all Fairyland for three years. He had half broken from his enchantment, and lifted himself out of the water; his long yellow hair and beard flowed down upon his breast, mingled with rushes and water-reeds; his eyes were still closed, but his face, unlike that of a drowned man, was bright, ruddy and lighted with hope. Nevertheless tears quivered in the heavy lashes as the child approached.

"Wherefore grieve ye, my son?" said Thomas the Rhymer, as with slow footsteps he followed Alice to the riverside.

"I see wee feet near me, the feet that are yet white frae the snaw of Eildon Hill."

"And why listen ye to ilka sound, my son?"

"I hear a blithe voice ahint me, the voice that spak wi' her yestreen. Oh, Marion, Marion!"

The tones died away in a wail as the young borderer's head sank upon his breast.

True Thomas gazed upon his descendant, and the pensive repose of his own features were overshadowed.

"Gin I had been like ye, a leal lover and faithfu' spouse, I hadna wonne into Fairyland. My puir bodie wad be lying saft aneath the Tower o' Ercildoun, and the saints in paradise wad keep my saul. But what's dune is dune. Even ye, my son, your ill deed maun be punished; yet for a' that, ye sall gang back safe to bonnie Melrose and live happy, though in poortith and toil. For, as I hae foretold lang syne—

'The hare sall hirple on my hearth-stane,
There'll ne'er be a Laird o' Learmont again.'

So spoke he, with a grave sweetness becoming the lips that never lied. At his words, strong shudders convulsed the frame of Thomas Learmont.

"Oh, it's hame that I wad be; hame, hame!" he moaned; and his moaning went up to the pale sky, and his trembling shook the glassy waters of Elfland.

Alice crept away, as if she feared or disliked the sight of emotion, a thing to her unknown. She went merrily to watch beside the golden gates of the enchanted vale until the fairy train returned.

Thomas the Rhymer watched too. His harp lay at his feet—the same harp which had echoed in the Tower of Ercildoun; sometimes he touched a chord or two, chanting fragments of his own poem of "Sir Tristram," once so renowned, the very name of which is now scarce remembered along Tweedside. As he sang, his face shone with the calm and solemn beauty of middle age, which two centuries had left unchanged; only that over all was a vague sadness and unrest which came at times, when earthly memories marred the even tenor of his elfin joys.

He had not long sat waiting, when from afar was heard the bridle-ringing that heralded the Queen of Fairies and her court. True Thomas laid down his harp and smiled.

"Ah," he said musingly; "'tis a sweet sound; I mind it weel. Blithely sung the mavis on Huntley Bank; the grass was saft and green, and the gowans wat wi' dew. Oh, but ye were a May meet for a young man's love, my bonnie Elf-Queen!"

So spoke he, and beheld afar the gallant train. In the midst of it, riding on her dapple gray palfrey, all in her green kirtle set with beryl stone, he saw the lady of his love—even as she appeared to him the first time out of the greenwood by the hill side; and his grave eye kindled like that of an aged poet at the memory of youthful dreams.

But the fairy lady was not given to dreaming. Merrily

rode she on, her palfrey's bells ringing at every step; a mingling of silver bells and silver laughter. Lightsome and heartless was the glitter of her eyes, and gayly swept she the Rhymer by, like the changed goddess of many a young bard's worship.

He followed her with aspect thoughtful indeed, but not love-lorn: he had no more lives of earth to peril for a moment of passion. Slow and grave was his step as he entered the elfin ring.

"Ha! my True Thomas, hither you come at last: is it for news of the bonnie banks of Tweed and the gray tower of Ercildoun, where the white owl sits beside the 'hoodie crow?' Would my bold Thomas wend thither again?"

"Never mair, never mair!" sighed he: "But I wad fain hae speech wi' ye, my ladye and my queen."

"Say on, only sigh no more, it torments my merry elves. And we have been having a blithesome raid, up and down in the snow; scaring and leading astray folk that have been abroad keeping their New Year; ha! ha!"

'Lord what fools these mortals be!'

as sings a young English poet, whom I would say for sure had been in Fairyland, only he paints me so little after received tradition, and so much out of his own fancy, that I hardly know my own likeness. Eh, my elves! shall we send home our ancient Rhymer, and go to Avon's banks to steal sweet Will?"

"Ye sport and jest, my ladye and love," said True Thomas, sadly; "ye heed not that the year's begun—the seventh year. When it's second morn appears, ye'll see the Evil Ane wend up that sloping road to claim the teind to hell."

Terror—the sole terror they knew—seized the fairy folk; the dances ceased, and the gitters and lyres, falling from elfin-hands, began to wail of their own accord.

"Who fears?" said the Queen. "Let the teind be paid! I have a fine stout mortal fattening under Kelpie's hands, in the river near. Ha, ha! my young Thomas Learmont will serve my turn well."

"Nae harm can touch the lad," answered the Rhymer, sternly. "He has a wife at hame wha prays for him nicht and day, to Ane that here we maunna name, I foresee that this same year a mortal will be won away frae Elfland."

"You grow bold in speech, my knight of old!"

"I speak wi' the lips that canna lee."

The queen looked as abashed and angry as it was possible for a fairy to look. "I marvel, True Thomas, that your vision extends no further, and that, though you are grown old and ill-favored with two centuries of life, you do not see your noble self wending that fated road."

And she pointed to a downward slope blackening in the distance, from which all the elves turned their eyes, for they knew it was the gate of hell.

On the other hand rose the thin cloudland of Paradise! while between both, like glistening fantastic towers, with fair landscapes between, was seen the land of Faery.

The Rhymer gazed around and turned to his mistress.

"Do ye mind, my queen, the day ye laid my head on your knee and showed me thae three sights? For your luvye I wonned frae earth, and I hae tint heaven; but hell will ne'er open her mouth for me. I maun bide here in Faery forever mair."

"And grieve you at that, True Thomas?" smiled the winning elf, assuming the aspect by which she once wiled the youth away from Huntley Bank.

"I grieve not," murmured he, while his eyes glittered with a passion before which the mirth of Fairyland sank spiritless and tame; "I wad dree it ower and ower for siccan joy!"

He sank kneeling at his lady's feet, and for a brief space thought of earth no more.

But soon there came flitting near him little Alice, whispering:

"There's the man with the bonnie yellow hair moaning out: 'Hame, hame;' and it frights my butterflies in the

meadow—my bright fishes in the stream. I cannot sleep or play for listening. Entreat our mistress to send him 'hame.'

So True Thomas changed from elfin wooing to entreaties for his descendant.

"Oh, the trouble you mortals give me!" cried the Queen of Fairies. "There are too many of you here: you will produce quite a revolution in our government. But for all that I cannot let my handsome prisoner go. He began an evil fray and fell into the Tweed, hard fighting, he and his adversary together. The tide swept Geordie Graham down while I stood by and laughed, for I knew that the other was mine."

"But no for aye. It's lang syne, yet Marion Learmont's saut tears fa'. She prays; and there's Ane that will hear. Send the young man back to earth, my gentle elfin queen."

"Ay, and then give back my fair changeling, too?—impossible? One or the other I must keep. So lie thee down, True Thomas, at my feet, and let us hearken to wee Alice's songs."

But wee Alice, standing by, looked half-thoughtful still.

"The man is moaning yet. He wearies me. Let him go back to earth, and keep me in his stead always."

The Rhymer smiled, with the glad sense of a poet who beholds that noblest sight—a generous deed.

"My bairn—the dear earth blude is in ye yet: ye wad tane a', and win your father!"

"Father," repeated the child, carelessly; "it is a strange word—I know it not. And what is earth to me? I spent a weary night last night, wandering there over the snow and brier. I would rather stay in Fairyland."

"But ye gaed hame, my bairn—hame to sweet Melrose? ye sat by the ingle-side that was your father's? ye crept close to your mither's knee?" eagerly cried Thomas of Er-cildoun.

"It was a gloomy place, dark and cold. There was a woman there, doleful to see. She never smiled, or danced, or sung, but only wept. It wearied me. I would rather stay in Fairyland."

"Then stay, my merry changeling," cried the delighted queen. "Not an elf in my kingdom shall live so blithely as you. By all means stay."

"For seven years, nae mair," said the Rhymer, earnestly. "My ladye and queen, ye hae me by my ain will, for that I first sought your luve, and not ye mine. Ay, and again I were fu' fain to tane my saul for your beauty's sake. But ilk ither mortal man, woman, or wean, ye may keep seven year, and nae mair."

"My true Thomas, your earth-born honesty is very inconvenient in Fairyland. Nevertheless, away with the burly Border Squire; and come my bright Alice, and my light-some elves, let us to our sports again."

That night, when the lights were out in all Melrose, and the new moon shone dimly on the snow—when the young Marion sat weeping by her fireless hearth, where even the cricket's song had ceased in the cold and silence—there came a step on the threshold—a voice in the darkness—a strong, close, passionate clasp, that he felt, yet saw not. But when the moonlight glinted palely in, she knew the noble hight, the broad stalwart breast, the yellow hair. It was the dead alive—the lost found.

Yet even on that joyful night, when marvels hardly seemed to be such, since love was ready unquestioning to receive all, many a time Marion would droop tearful on his neck, sighing out:

"Oh, husband! our bairn, our bairn!"

CHAPTER V.

COME ben, come ben, my bairnies a'!" softly cried a mother—not a young mother now—as she stood by the ingleside and threw on a fresh fagot, which merrily lighted up the dusk of the winter night.

An old woman, bent and withered, cowered over the blaze, and childishly watched it glittering between the joints of her skeleton fingers.

"It's a rare fire, Marion," mumbled she; "we hae na had the like o't for mony a New Year. Wow! but its unco fine!"

"Aweel, gudemither, gin ye're content!" answered Mistress Learmont, half sorrowfully. "Yet, I'se warrant it has been 'muckle siler and muckle dule' sin the day the gudeman was awa' to serve the queen in Edinburgh. Eh! callants, I fear me ye'll no see your daddy this braw New Year."

So she said to the two sturdy bare-legged laddies that came from the next room, toddling to the welcome fire. A third—the eldest apparently, entered from without doors, bringing in plenty of snow upon his shoeless feet and flaxen hair. For he, too, was a "yellow-haired laddie," a true son of the Learmont race. He was his father's very image; a great fellow, whose bulk almost belied the round, innocent face of six years old. The other two were fat, sunburnt, roly-poly creatures—twins. The last born, a delicate looking child, who could just stand alone—and whose sole speech was the dumb language of blue eyes—was crawling about the floor—making vain efforts to get nearer to the beautiful blaze.

They were all boys, these later blessings sent to comfort Marion Learmont after her woes. There never came another daughter.

Every human being must change, more or less, in seven years. Mistress Thomas Learmont was a douce, matronly body now. She could chatter and she could scold, though not often; for she was of a sweet nature always. But she had to be both father and mother to her boys, in the absence of the gudeman, whom chance had lifted to comparative prosperity, as archer of the guard to Queen Mary. Mere infants as they were, there was their race's fierce spirit in the lads, so that poor Marion had sore trouble to manage them at times.

They had not been long gathered round the fire when a domestic storm arose.

"Hey, Habbie, what are ye yaumerin' for? Haud your ill tongue, Jock! Wee Sandy, come and tell your minnie what ails ye. Oh, laddies, laddies, what'll I do wi' ye a'?"

"Why dinna ye wish the 'gude neighbors' wad tak them, and send ye back your ae dochter?" grumbled the old woman. "I'd gie a' these il'-lured callants for ane bonnie lass bairn."

"Ye didna think sae ance, gudemither. Gin ye had, maybe my puir Alice had been safe at your knee. Now, ye'll gang to your grave, and me too, wi' ne'er a dochter to close our e'en."

Marion sighed bitterly. Strange it seemed, and yet was not strange, that amidst the cares and joys which followed after, the mother never forgot her first-born. Year by year, as Alice's birth-night came round, she grew thoughtful, and watched with anxiety; but never again, in any shape, vision, or sound, did the changeling appear. At last a sacredness like unto death stilled the pain of this heavy loss; many other children came to comfort the bereaved mother—yet the wound was never thoroughly healed. Constantly, when the boys were to her cold or rough, as boys will be, she would sigh after the one lost blessing, which, like all vanished joys, seemed dearer than any of the rest.

She sat by the ingle; and, rocking on her knee the gentlest of the tribe, the little year-old babe, whose looks sometimes reminded her of Alice, gave herself up to sad thoughts, which, on this New Year's eve, seemed to come thicker and faster than ordinary.

"What for do you greet, minnie?" cried one after the other of the bairns, gathering round her; for childhood's heart is always tender, and the wildest boys are often the most moved at sight of trouble.

Marion uncovered her eyes, to see Habbie and Sandy with great thunder-drops of tears in theirs; while Hugh, the boldest, stood in an attitude of defiance, as if ready to challenge

some invisible foe who had made his mother weep. Even the wee thing at her lap lifted up his sweet looks in troubled wonderment, and nestled closer to her, bringing unconscious comfort.

"Ye're gude bairns a'," said the mother tenderly, as she caressed them by turns. But, oh! ye arena my Alice—my ae dochter—that I will see nae mair!"

The children had often heard of their sister Alice, and had questioned about her with childish awe. With them she had grown into a sort of myth, to be thought of with grave faces and spoken of softly. They had even set up a kind of rude service to her—children often have the oddest instinctive notions of worship. Many a tiny bowl of milk, or rosy-cheeked apple, was left on the "door-stand," or carried to some thicket on Eildon Hill, or placed at four cross-roads, in the vague hope that "Sister Alice" would somehow come and partake of it. And as, of course, the dainty frequently vanished, they would come home feeling sure that "Sister Alice" had indeed received their gift.

Now, when they heard the rare mention of her name, they became silent and grave. Only Hugh, who being next eldest to the lost one, thought himself peculiarly privileged, took courage to say—

"Mither, dinna ye greet for Sister Alice; and I'll gang and speer for her ower the hale world."

The mother shook her head.

"But I will, mither," cried the fearless boy. "What like is she?—When gaed she awa?"

It was a bold question; for Marion had feared to tell the whole story of Alice's disappearance to her young children, and had left their speculations thereon vague and dim. But somehow, to-night her heart was opened and her tongue loosed.

"Bide ye here, callants, and I'll tell ye. What like was she?—she was the sweetest wee lady, limp and sma'—wieen like Willie's here, but oh, sae bright! She was ta'en awa on this nicht, the nicht she was born, just ten year sin-syne. She came back ance—twice—ilka new year, and then nae mair. Ah, laddies, she came nae mair!"

"And where is she noo, mither?"

"She's in a braw, braw land, blithe and gay, amang folk that it's no gude to speak o', my bairns."

"Then they're no gude ava," cried Hughie, boldly. "Maybe they'll gar forget her minnie and us. I'll gang and fecht them a'!"

Marion laid her finger on her little son's lips, and, with the other hand, was about tremblingly to make the sign of the cross—but stopped, remembering what that good man John Knox had said, when last he preached under the shadow of Eildon Tree. Scarcely had she collected her thoughts and resolved not to fear, when through a pause in the blast which seemed suddenly to have risen, shaking the whole dwelling, she heard a sound that was neither wind nor storm.

"Eh! siccan a sight!" shouted the daring Hugh, who had rushed to the window. "Sax braw white horses dragging a thing like a wain, only bonnier far; wi' sie grand folk intilt, and mony mair ridin' ahint the lave."

"Surely, it's a coach, that fine new wain your daddie saw. Maybe the queen herself is there. Oh, bairnies, rin and hide!"

"I'll no hide," said Hugh. "I wad like to speak to the queen. Folk say she's a bonnie leddy."

Without more ado, this bold young scion of the humbled Learmont race unbarred the door and walked out. Marion, trembling, followed. The coach and attendants had apparently driven away, for she saw them not, though she fancied she heard the sound of retreating wheels. There was only a faint glare, like that of invisible torches, cast on the road; and there she saw her son escorting a brilliant little lady, who seemed neither quite a woman nor yet a child.

One frenzied hope darted through the mother's heart, but quickly it faded when Hugh rushed in.

"Mither! here's a bonnie wee leddy, sent frae the queen."

"Frae the queen? wi' news o' your daddie? Ah, she's kindly welcome," said the mother, but still she drew back in disappointment.

Hugh ran gallantly to the aid of his lovely guest, who hesitated at the threshold.

"Come ben, my wee leddy," said he, eagerly, apparently not in the least abashed either by her fair presence, or by her gold and jewels and gay robes.

"I can not come in, unless you lift me," murmured the dainty creature, in tones like a silver bell.

Hugh sturdily gathered up all the strength of his childish arms and carried her over the door-sill, into the very middle of the floor. There she stood—a beautiful vision, making all light about her, as though her very garments shone. But gradually the glitter paled off, and she seemed nothing more than a very small, elegantly-formed lady, magnificently clad, but with the face and manner of a child.

Despite its change, and against the utter improbability of the thing, the mother fancied she knew that face. Tremblingly she advanced to the guest.

"Wha may ye be, my sweet wee lady?"

"I was not to tell my name."

"Wherefore came ye?"

"The queen sent me."

And whatever questions were put, the only answer that could be won from the little damsel was still the same—"The queen sent me."

Her sudden appearance and dazzling mein spread such an admiring awe over the little circle that they felt no power to question her; but in their intercourse, the little lady altogether took the initiative.

She flitted about the house, peering into every hole and corner with most amusing pertinacity. She played with the children and pulled them about, more with curiosity than interest; and at last having fairly bewildered them all with her beauty, her willful ways, and her perpetual chatter in a tongue which at first seemed to them strange and court-like, but gradually became intelligible and more like their own, she called for something to eat.

It was supper time; and the mother had been preparing bowls of porridge, turning every now and then, with an incomprehensible yearning, to watch the movements of their guest; yet evermore repelled by something in the fair creature's mein which told that her hopes were delusions, that it was impossible this could be her Alice—her child.

"I want some food," again cried the visitor, impatiently.

Marion got ready the children's messes. She sat out five, instead of four portions, and placed the first and largest before the stranger.

"Will ye eat wi' my bairns? ye're dearly welcome," said she, tenderly.

The little lady tasted the porridge, and threw it aside with a gesture of disgust. "It is not like my food; give me some better."

It was strange, but the words and look went like an arrow to Marion's heart.

"I haena ony better," she said, sadly. "Gin ye come to puir folk's door, ye maun live as puir folk live."

The little damsel laughed, more carelessly than angrily; and with hungry looks suffered Hugh to place her bowl once more within her hand.

"Bide a wee," whispered Marion, as she was about to begin. "My bairns, say your grace afore meat, as ye hae been taught."

One after the other the boys—in this, at least, well lessoned—folded their hands and said a few words of prayer. At the sound, the new comer began to tremble and grow pale; at last she set up a loud cry—

"Oh, it hurts me—it hurts me!"

"What, my sweet lassie?"

"Oh, my heart—my heart!" and she begun to weep.

Hugh started up, but the mother put him back, and threw her arms, brown and hard with labor, round the silken-robed child.

"Tell me, in the great Name ye ken o', wha may ye be?"

The girl struggled with difficulty to speak. I'm Alice—Alice Learmont; let me go back to whence I came.”

“I winna let ye gang, my ain bairn, my dochter!” cried the mother, snatching her clothes, and sobbing over her. “Come near, laddies, haud her fast—fast! She's your sister Alice.”

Amazed, the children clung round; some admiring her bright clothing, and others half frightened at the wild elfin beauty of her face, for she was now smiling again.

But the mother wept still.

“Is it your ain sel', my dochter?” cried she, fondling the pretty creature who, nevertheless, every now and then tried to escape out of her hands. “Eh, but ye're grown a winsome lassie, your hair sae shining, and your skin sae white! I wadna hae kent my wee Alice, my ain dear bairn!”

“Indeed?” said the little maiden carelessly, as she rearranged her tossed hair, and smoothed her crumpled gear, too bright and gaudy for the touch of common mortal hands; “Was I ever in this ugly dark place before?”

“Do you no mind o' that?” said the mother, sadly; “Hae ye forgotten your ain mither? Ye're a braw, braw leddy now, but ye were ance a pair bit bairnie in these arms.”

Alice smiled with an air of indifference, and turned from the worn and pensive looking mother to the children, who, young, rosy, and fair, seemed more like herself and her elfin companions.

“Are these my brothers, and will they play with me, as the little fairy-children do in the land where I live?”

“Eh, whar is that land?” asked bold Hugh, the first who had dared to address their magnificent new sister.

“I know not, but it must be a long way off, for it's a country so much prettier than this.”

And she went peering about into dark and dusty corners, and curled her sweet lips in a half-scornful indifference at everything she saw.

“Do you always live here?” said Alice, when at last she and the rest had become more sociable. “Where are your golden halls, and your silver dining tables, and your sweet music? And why don't you laugh and dance—in this way?”

Immediately she began to float and bound, with an air so ravishingly graceful and joyous that she seemed like a creature of light compared with the other children, who watched her in dumb wonder, Hugh especially.

“Is it thus ye live in your land? Eh, but I never see'd sic a bonnie ploy!”

“And how do you amuse yourself?” asked Alice, with dignified condescension.

“When it's simmer, I rin about the braes, or among the corn-rigs wi' the shearers; i' the mirk winter days I haud the pleugh; and then a' the spring-time I gang wi' the bit lammies on the hill. I'll show you the lammies, gin ye'll bide wi' us, Sister Alice.”

She seemed amused and pleased, and her sweet, winning looks stole the very heart of the affectionate boy. He went boldly to his sister, kissed her mouth and hugged her close, saying, “I'm unco glad ye're come, Sister Alice; but gin ye hadna come o' your ain will, I would hae fought for ye and brought ye hame. Ye sall never gang awa mair.”

“Never gang awa mair?” cried Alice, mimicking him, as she stole sily out of his embrace, and once more began dancing about the floor.

The children forgot their supper in watching her, half with shy wonder, half with delight; so graceful, so blithe was she, so utterly free from thought or care. But the neglected mother sat in a corner apart and mourned.

More than once she came to her child, and, with piteous tenderness, looked into those blue eyes whose brightness was never shadowed by one cloud of regret, or emotion, or love.

“Are ye no my Alice?” she would say, imploringly; “and haena ye ae kiss for your ain mither that bore ye? Ah, las-

sie! what wad I gie for ane wee wordie, just 'Mither',—naething mair.”

Alice shook her head and laughed. “It's a new word; I don't understand it.” And then she went back to her sports among her brothers.

Merry sports they were, and with much wonderment she sometimes paused to listen to Hugh's harrangues, very sensible for his years.

“Ye're our ae sister, and we aye liked ye weel, though we never saw ye. Why did ye no come home? Mither used to greet for ye; she aye loed ye aboon the lave.”

“Alice turned a curious glance to her mother. “What does *loving* mean?” she asked.

Hughie was puzzled. At last he tried a practical illustration. He wrapped his arms round his fairy-like sister, and kissed her with childish fondness, which she did not repulse, though she took it coldly and wonderingly.

“It means *that*,” said he, “an' it means that I'll tak tent o' ye, and I'll carry ye when ye're wearied, and treat ye weel, and no beat ye, as I beat Habbie and Sandy; I'm your ain brither, and I loe ye, Alice dear!”

Alice paused in her frolics, and putting her tiny hand among Hugh's curls, looked as if her eyes were drinking in from his some strange new lesson of human affection. But, turning, she saw in a tiny mirror her own fair image; suddenly bursting away, she danced up to it, and became absorbed by pleasure at the sight of her glittering frock and her silver shoes.

The night wore on; the old grandmother had gone to her rest long ago, an' knew nothing of the strange visitant who had so fascinated the children. But at length even they grew weary; while the little elfin maiden still frolicked, her brothers dropped away one after the other—and came, in the wearied, peevish mood that very young children have, to take shelter by their mother's side. Mistress Learmont soothed them, and folded her arms around them, though in the troubled bewilderment of her own mind she did not attempt to put them to bed. Whatever she did, or wherever she moved, her eyes never quitted her beloved first-born, whom now she left to her own devices, and tried to caress no more.

Hugh was the last to leave his sister, but even he came to the ingleside at length, rubbing his eyes, and looking dull and melancholy.

“She's no like a real lassie. She's unco' fair and unco' gleg, but she'll no be our ain sister,” said he disconsolately, as he gathered himself up on the hearth, and laid his head wearily on his mother's knee. The twin laddies were already dropping to sleep beside her, and wee Willie had nestled close into her bosom. Marion kissed them all round, tenderly and with tears.

While she did so, she was aware of the approach of her eldest child, who glided softly into the circle. Alice's eyes were downcast, and there was a strange sadness in her aspect.

“Mother!” she said, and Marion could have shrieked with joy at the word. “Have you got never a kiss for me?”

“My bairn! my bairn!” she cried, but could not rise for the other sleeping children that clung round her. She stretched out her hand and drew her into the circle. Slowly, neither with impulse nor with hesitation, Alice came. Her bright face was rather grave, and there was a softer expression in her sparkling eyes. She let her mother fold her close to her breast; and lay there quietly, though without any caresses.

But for the mother herself, her joy was unutterable and without bounds. It forced itself out in sobs and tears, which fell on the neck of the fairy child. Alice recoiled.

“I do not like that; the tears wet me. Why do you cry?”

“For joy, my dochter. But I winna do't gin it grieves ye.” And Marion tried to smile and be merry, though her heart was so full that the mirth seemed but an idle show.

Alice leaned on her breast with a quiet, contented look—

a look subdued almost into earthliness—until the night wore on, and the light on the hearth faded. Then she drew herself away restlessly.

"It's very dark and dull, and I'm cold, mother."

"Come closer and I'll warm ye, my bairn; I hae dune that, mony a nicht, to thae wee lads your brithers, that were born amid poortith, and cauld, and care!"

Alice looked frightened, and shivered more and more. "Is this what they call living on earth, mother? If I had lived here among ye would I have been hungry and cold, and dressed in ugly clothes, like you and my brothers there?"

"I fear me it wad hae been and will be, my Alice," sighed the mother. "But we'll tend you close, and loe ye sae dear—oh, sae dear!"

In vague fear the poor woman strained her daughter to her breast. Her coarse garments frayed the tender skin, her look and speech were almost rough in their passionate intensity. Yet the deep love in her eyes would, to one who could feel and respond to it, have atoned for the sublimated all. But such a common-place, every-day thing as love was quite unknown in Fairyland.

Alice, half-frightened, half-annoyed, crept a little way further from her mother. She had hardly done so, when a cock crowing loudly from the farm broke upon the night's silence. The children were all asleep; Marion herself, despite her struggles against it, felt herself overpowered by a hazy dream. Just as the cock crew she heard clearly, rolling nearer and nearer, the sound of wheels which had heralded her daughter's coming. She knew instinctively that it was the signal for Alice's being snatched from her once more.

She could not cry out or speak; her tongue seemed bound. She only turned her imploring eyes to the little elfin-maiden, and saw with agony unutterable that the warning, to her so dreadful, had brightened her daughter's face with joy.

"They're coming! I will soon be back in my merry home. Fare you well, good mother," cheerfully cried Alice, as the wheels stopped, and a brilliant light glimmered through the black window and under the chinks of the crazy door. "Fare you well," she repeated, as with a sudden spring she bounded out of her mother's desperate hold.

Marion's tongue was loosed; she uttered a shriek like that we sometimes utter in dreams. To herself it seemed the very rending of her soul; but it was in reality a mere sigh, not loud enough to wake the infant who slumbered on her knees.

She felt the little maiden turn and pat her cheek for a moment, escaping quickly and softly, like a bird out of the hand.

"Don't cry, mother; it makes you look not pretty, and it hurts me. But I can't stay here; I must go back to my beautiful home."

There was a light tap at the door, which was merely latched. Now Marion knew that the fairies could only enter through a door left open, or opened unto them. She tried to rise, but could not. Then she made frantic signs to Alice to bolt and bar entrance, but in vain.

Another tap came; for the daughter was pausing to look in mingled wonder and doubt on the agonized countenance of her mother. A third summons—and then, with her own hands, the changeling opened the door.

A flood of light—a multitude of airy beings filling the gloomy house, and Alice herself, blithe and beautiful as any, fitting among them all!

It was but for a moment; then the vision began to fade, and the mother knew that her child was departed. With a vehement cry she called upon the one Name which all beings, of whatever race, must obey.

The fairy train paused, and Alice was left standing on the threshold, her eyes wandering between the lowly home within and the brilliant pageant without.

"What do you want with me?" she said. "Must I stay and live here in this house? It is so dark, so dreary. Yet my mother—"

She stood irresolute, looking at the little group among

whom for one hour she had lain, encircled by caresses, and learning for the first time that there was a sweeter thing even than the perpetual pleasures of elfin-land. A little, too, she seemed moved by the despair with which the dumb, spell-bound mother stretched out imploring hands.

"Choose, Alice, choose," chanted the elves from without, as the glitter of their invisible torches flashed upon her, lighting up her fair countenance and her amber hair.

She turned; their elfin glamour was cast over her, and every rising emotion of earth and earthly tenderness was stilled.

"Farewell!" she cried; and without casting one more look at the dark cottage—the little brothers who lay sleeping where they had played with her—the poor mother, whose dumb anguish was all in vain—Alice passed from the threshold and disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL days and all years are alike in Fairyland. One after the other they glide, like waves in a river of which the current never changes. And though there are among these light-some beings elves young and old, save that the infirmities of age are unknown; though as veracious chroniclers have asserted, they continually marry and replenish their community with elfin babes—still their existence flows on in a perpetual monotony; and their unreal pleasures remain always the same.

Four winters had the snow gathered and melted on the crest of Eildon Hill, since Alice vanished from her mother's cottage, on that last New Year's morn. But summers and winters make no count in Elfland; and it seemed to the changeling as if she had only been gone four days.

No extraneous power can change the eternal laws of nature; and despite the will of the Queen of Fairies, the little stolen mortal had grown up to be a maiden of fourteen years. She was still tiny enough for an earthly damsel; but she walked the soft sward of Fairyland, casting a gigantic shadow which quite alarmed her elfin mates. Even the queen herself, who bore the stamp of royalty as the tallest of her race, and who in past times had actually prided on being able, standing tiptoe, to gird with her emerald girdle her earthly love, the Knight of Ercildoun—even the Queen began to begin to be indignant that her young handmaiden was an inch or two above herself, and was growing, she strongly suspected, very nearly as fair.

"Look at her, my True Thomas," her majesty observed (for with true royal caprice, or from scarcity of stolen mortals, she had of late gone back to her old love)—"Look how mundane she is, far too tall and round; and her step is so heavy, it would crush half a dozen of my pet grasshoppers. Nay, she has even got a most unpleasant earthly gloom on her face; as doleful as yourself, my knight, when you begin to dream of the old tower where the owls hoot, and the corbie builds."

True Thomas sighed.

"Would you go back to earth again?" mocked the Queen, in her pretty willful way; "My sister majesty on the throne of Scotland is as fair, as love-winning, and—so you wad say—as fatal in her love as myself. "Oh, it was a bonnie biazze that one night scared my elves who dwell underneath the Calton Hill! and truly there is no moonlight riding over the plain of Langsyde for the ugly corpses that lie bleaching there! Eh, would you go back to earth, my gallant Thomas?"

The Rhymer's head fell on his breast. "For me," said he, mournfully; for me there is nae return. And I wadna see the black, black nicht that's fa'ing, and maun fa', ower my dear Scotland. But it's after mirkest nicht that glints the dawn. I see't, I see't! Years on years maun pass, and ne'er a queen's foot sall fa' on Scottish heather. And then ane comes—a Leddy wi' saft sma' tread; wearing a marriage ring that's dearer than her crown; hearing bairns' voices at hame, sweeter than a' the clavers o' daft crowds, Ah, she's the Queen for bonnie Scotland!"

"Hold your tongue, True Thomas," said her Majesty,

rather unceremoniously; "no one here ever thinks of to-morrow; it is only you stupid mortals who bring the unpleasant word 'future' into Fairyland. Look, as I said before, at your descendant there; see her eyes, so clouded and grave; can it be that despite my care the old Learmont leaven has reached her blithe spirit?"

The Rhymer looked. Alice was walking slowly down the river side, the same river which meandered through Fairyland, rising and disappearing, how or whither none could trace. She had neared the place where the water lilies grew thick, and where they had once twined their long stems round the form of the mortal captive who lay there three years bound, afar from sweet Melrose. Some recollection seemed to possess the changeling, for she stayed in the same spot where she had then stayed to look at her father. Sitting down by the bank, she played with the water-plants and dipped her fingers in the stream. It went on, singing over the pebbles with a melancholy, monotonous flow, just like earthly rivers. Indeed, it seemed the only earthly sound in Fairyland.

Alice listened, and slowly there came a deep, strange pensiveness to her eyes.

"What hear ye, Alice?" said Thomas of Ercildoun, coming nearer;—for her volatile majesty of Elfland had suddenly described a lovely specimen of entomology sailing down the river side, and had summoned all her court on a dragon fly hunt; leaving her mortal lover to dream on the green bank alone. "Why harken ye to the stream wi' sic a waefu' heart?"

Alice looked up. "My heart! is it so? is this weight on my heart what my mother called care? Then, I did not understand the word!" said she, musingly.

"It is even sae. Were ye thinking o' your mither?"

"I do that sometimes, now, when I get dull and weary. It is so weary to be always gay—and then I was born on earth, and not in Fairyland."

So said she, very gently, and with an altered tone of womanly thoughtfulness. Either the fairies' power had grown weaker, or the mother's prayers stronger; but there was certainly a change coming over the child. Having spoken, she again bent her head to the water, listening.

"What hear ye?" repeated Thomas, eagerly.

"I hear the murmur of the river, and other sounds that it brings with it, seemingly from a long way."

"And thae sounds are unlike aught here. There's weeping and wailing, and sa't sighs, and tears that fa' sweeter than kisses? I ken them weel; it's the sounds of earth that float alang wi' the earth-risen stream," cried the Rhymer, as he stooped and laved his hands and brow. "Oh, bonnie river, come ye frae the Tweed; or frae my ain bright Leader, that rins by Ercildoun? Oh, sweet water! whar did ye spring, and whither do ye flow?"

His heart seemed bursting with those words, but very soon his aspect grew calm, and he again asked Alice what she heard.

"I can hear naething of earth mysel'," he said; "never sin' the day I shut my ear to ilka voice but that whilk led astray. But ye were stown awa, a puir barn that kent no gude nor ill. Listen, Alice, and tell me."

"I hear great lamenting along the river-brink—screams of children in terror—and people shouting about some one being drowned. And now there's a choking cry—ah! I know who that is! It's Hughie, my bonnie brother, so kind and so brave! I must run—I must run!"

With an impulse quite strange and unaccountable in Fairyland, the earth-born maiden started off and flew along toward the source of the river; skimming almost like a bird over bush and brake, through green bank and morass, wherever the windings of the stream led. She thought not of her companion; she never looked behind; on she went, guided by the sound which she seemed still to hear—the gasping sobs of a drowning child.

As Alice proceeded, the face of the country changed. The sunny plains of Elfland became grim rocks, through which the river flowed with angry bursts and moans. At last the

thin rift of blue overhead altogether vanished; she found herself in a cavern hung with oozy water-plants, and rugged with basaltic fragments.

Alice knew she had passed from the domain of the merry earth-elves to the gloomy abode of the Kelpie, the water demon, whose pleasures were only in the working of ill. There he sat, the grim creature—not beautiful, like the Queen of Fairies and her train—but foul and ugly to behold.

His face and brawny shoulders were those of an old man, the gray wild hair drooping down like withered sedge; but underneath, half in and half out of the water, his form was like that of a huge river horse.

He had a harp of reeds beside him, upon which he played sweet music to allure his prey, and ever amid his playing he reared, snorted and plunged, hoarsely laughing between, in a tone mockingly human.

So uncouth and fearsome a creature was he that the child would have crept away in terror, but that far hid in the darkness of the cave, floating hither and thither upon the dark waters, she saw the glitter of yellow hair. It looked like the form of a drowned boy swaying to and fro on the surface.

A strange emotion possessed the changeling maiden—a feeling stronger than the desire for pleasure, or mirth, or sport—an emotion that drew her out of herself and toward another.

The one night in her mother's cottage flashed upon her like a dream, not of weariness, but of sweetness. She hardly knew what she was doing, but somehow she murmured all the home names, scarcely noticed at the time. While so doing the waves stirred the face of the drowned child and turned it toward her. It was that of the eldest and most loving of her brothers, Hugh!

He lay, his bonnie face pale, but composed and sweet as if safely pillowed at home, instead of being tossed on those hungry waves. His fingers still tightly grasped his blue bonnet and his shepherd's staff, as though it were in fording some current that the Kelpie had overtaken him. He had grown into a sturdy boy, but the frank beauty of his mien was the same as when Alice had twisted her fingers in his curls, and looked for the first time in a brother's face.

She remembered it all—and how, in the merry games of Fairyland, she had often paused and wished for Hughie to come and say the sweet words—never said or thought of by the elfin lightsome race, "I love you." She longed to reach him, and hear them over again.

"Hughie, brother," she whispered over the waves, but in vain: she dared not come nearer the fierce Kelpie, who sat and played in dignified gravity, never looking toward the mortal who was invading his domain. And farther—farther every minute, the river was drifting the helpless form of the drowned boy.

Alice paused a moment; her bare feet trembled in the cold water and among the sharp rocks; then acting on an impulse unknown before, she waded in—deeper—deeper, until her footing slid from her.

She had never heard of death; yet as she felt her breath failing, some strange formless horror seemed to encompass her. Nevertheless she tried to grasp the yellow hair and to cling closer to her brother; as if whatever happened, she would be safer thus. Then all sensation ceased.

She woke on the greensward of Fairyland, with Hughie tightly clasped in her arms, and over them bending the grave countenance of Thomas of Ercildoun.

The seer looked from one to the other of the children; but Alice noticed only Hughie, who still lay as if asleep.

"Oh, wake him, wake him!" she cried; and a new tone of human pain thrilled through her smooth accents of Fairyland.

"He'll waken soon, and then he must gang far, far awa, or e'er 'tis morning on earth, and the queen comes hame to Fairyland. Haste ye, Alice; kiss him ance, twice, and then bid him farewell."

"I will not let him go; I want to keep him to play with—my own, own brother!"

"An ye wad keep him—a fair christened wean, in this ill place, while his mither grieves the leelang day? Ye wad gar him forget his hame, and a' that's gude, to bide here in Elf-land? And when the seventh year comes roun', and they pay the teind to hell—he's sae fat and fair, and weel liking; oh! wae's me for the lad!"

This and more the Rhymer urged; but little did Alice heed, or at least seem to heed. She smiled and laughed in wild elfin pleasure, as slowly Hughie opened his eyes. But not a word he said, except one bitter cry—"Hame, hame—I maun gae hame."

Alice led him everywhere, and showed him the fair landscapes and the banquet hall—but he took no pleasure therein.

"Oh, let's gae hame," he said perpetually. "It's a braw land, but it's nae like hame. Sister Alice, I durna bide wi' ye."

His sister listened, and her bright face was troubled with thought. "Must ye go, Hughie?" she said, now for the first time learning how sweet it was to share a pleasure that did not center in herself alone; learning, too, a little of that pain of parting, without which the happiness of affection were as unreal as light without shadow.

"Must ye go?" she repeated, sadly. As she spoke, it was already dawn in the world, and the ringing of the fairy bridles was heard afar, beyond the golden gates of Elf-land.

Alice grasped her brother—who now or never must be saved to return to earth. "You will not stay then, Hughie, dear? Ah well! it's best not. They're oftentimes wearisome—all the feasting, and dances, and pleasures. Go back to our mother, and bid her remember me."

Half sadly the little maiden spoke; but there was no time to talk more, for flashing through the golden gates came the fairy cavalcade.

"We must be gone," said Alice. "I know the earthward way;" and wrapping her arms round her young brother, she drew him into a brake of fern. She gathered a bunch of fern-seed, which, plucked on earth at St. John's Eve will make the wearer invisible—and set it in Hughie's bonnet.

Then she took him by the hand, and led him secretly toward the entrance to Fairyland. As they went out, they saw, standing behind them with sad eyes, him who never might pass those gates to his beloved country—Thomas the Rhymer, of Ercildoun.

"Is it far we hae to gang? and will ye gang wi' me, Sister Alice?" asked the boy.

"Ay," said Alice; "as far as may be."

So these children took together their strange journey. It was all amidst darkness; there was neither sun nor moon. Sometimes a pale, weird-like auroral light glimmered above them, showing each the other's face, dim and wan. At other times they went through mirk ways, seeing nothing, but hearing awful sounds like forests of trees sighing wildly, or waterfalls dashing, or seas roaring, close by. Again, they seemed to wade through deep rivers as red as blood; and then their feet slid along great masses of ice, or sank in black morasses. Alice always led the way, silent, but holding fast her brother's hand.

Hughie went on, not in his usual daring mood, but heavily like a boy in a dream. At times his feet lagged on the toilsome road, and he began to moan; then Alice would pause, and try to teach herself those things which women of earth learn instinctively, and have to practice all their life—how to bear with and to comfort the afflicted. It was a new lesson but very sweet.

On they went, over river and plain, mountain and valley, until at last they came to a cavern ending in a great doorway fashioned of green stone. Through its crevices glided a pale ray, like daylight, or like moonlight upon snow. By this glimmer they saw indistinctly the latter part of the way they had come; a steep path, rising, as it were, out of the depths of the earth. Between them and the light were these gigantic doors.

Hughie sat down before them, and wept: "Ah, sister Alice, I will never reach hame! I'll lay me down and dee."

But Alice showed him a cranny in the stone, through which came a broad beam of light—and bade him peep through.

"Tell me, what see ye, Hughie dear?"

"I see a long, white snow drift, braid and still. We're on a hill-tap, and the morn's blinking out i' the east, and the cocks are crowing afar. There's the Abbey o' Melrose! Oh, sister Alice, we're close at hame!"

He set up a shout of joy which made the black vault ring, and stretching his hand through the tiny hole, gathered some of the snow—the blessed snow which lay upon earthly plains, and put it to his parched lips. For he was weary and worn, poor child; while Alice looked as fresh and fair as she had done in the haunts of Fairyland. But while he smiled, she sighed.

"Yes, you will be soon at home, Hughie. Are you glad to go?"

"Ay, unco glad! I'll rin down the hill-side, and over the brig, and creep in at the byre, for the ha' door's steekit fast; an' gin our mither comes to milk the kye, I'll loup intil her arms. Then I'll ca' Habbie, and Sandy, and winsome Willie, and we'll a' be blithe thegither. Come, sister Alice," added he, advancing to the heavy door, "tirl the pin, and let's awa!"

"Away, then," said Alice, sadly; and fare you well, my bonnie brother that I will never see more!"

He hardly heard her, so eager was he in looking for the invisible fastening of the door. The moment his fingers touched it, it opened of its own accord, wide enough to admit of the boy's passing. He leaped through in an instant.

"Come awa, quick, sister!" cried Hugh, stretching out his hand from the other side.

"I cannot. They stole me, an unchristened child; I may not return to earth, unless they please. See, brother, the gates are closing, and crushing me. Ah, hold them back!"

For a moment the boy's fearless hands did as she bade; the brother and sister clung together and kissed one another sorrowfully through the opening that was momentarily diminishing between them. Then the great green doors closed with a hollow clang, and not a trace remained of where they had been.

Hughie sat and wept, all alone, on the snowy hill-side.

CHAPTER VII.

"Awa wi' your father, my bonnie sons; I wadna ye suld bide at hame wi' a pair sick doited body like mysel. Though it's wearie wark, lyin' here my lane; but may be it's no for lang."

The words, faint but patient, began cheerfully, and ended in a half-audible murmur. Mistress Learmont leaned back on the couch that was made up for her near the ingleside, and looked fondly, yet sorrowfully, on her three tall lads, now fast outgrowing boyhood. There were but three, Hugh and the twins. Winsome Willie, the youngest, had been covered up to sleep in the green kirkyard of Melrose—one of those lost darlings who are destined to live in household memory, endowed with the beauty of perpetual babyhood.

The triad of brothers left, Hugh, Halbert, and Alexander—though from the Scottish habit of diminutives, rarely enough did they win that full-lettered dignity—were near of an age and near of a height; fine, bold fellows, exalting the honors of the Learmont name through all the country round—ay, even though they were but plow-boys and herd-laddies. For to that low estate had their fortunes dwindled at last, when Queen Mary, needing no court nor guard, pined away it Tutbury-hold, and her archer, Thomas Learmont, returned to his old home. The next generation bade fair to merge the race of the old Knights of Ercildoun into mere tillers of the field and keepers of flocks and herds. Dame Learmont, now dead and gone, was the last that ever owned that honorary title.

"It's no for lang—its's no for lang," repeated the mother, as scarce reluctantly the lads obeyed her and went out, leaving her with a servant lassie. "It's sair to bide, though, while its lasts. A twelvemonth and mair I haena stirred from this ingleside. It was i' the winter time, ye ken, lass, that I fell sick; and now the winter's here ance mair. Eh? what day is't, Meg? Meg Brydon, I say!"

But the faint voice scarcely reached the careless young damsel, who stood watching the corner of the kailyard—it might be for the sake of enjoying that pleasant sight, a red winter sunset; especially as the foreground object was Jock the shepherd lad leaning against a dyke and whistling amain.

"Wae's me!" sighed Mistress Learmont, as she ceased the vain call and sank down once more on her uneasy pillow. "Its aye the same, and sae 'twill be till I am laid under the mools. Braw sons I hae, and a husband leal and kind, but they're no like a dochter. Ah! I mind when I was a lassie, and had a mither o' my ain—a pure wee wifie she was, sick and dowie, for she had ay a dour like o' mickle wae—I mind how ane day, when I was sitting by her, and she near her end, she said, 'Marion, ye hae been a gude bairn to me, a' your days; I ken nae what ye're ettled to be, nor how ye'll gae through this wearie warld; but, Marion, your mither leaves ye ane blessing, better than a'—may ye hae a dochter like yoursel!'—But I hae nane, and never will! Oh! Alice, Alice, wherefore did ye gang?"

Thus, bitterly moaning to herself over her never-healed loss, the mother lay. Meg Brydon had stolen out to Whistling Jock, leaving the door a little way open. The sharp winter air blew in upon the sick woman.

"Meg, can ye no come and hap me better? it's sair cauld. Ye dinna speak; ye canna be fashed wi' a puir sick body. Oh, dear Meg, be kind till me, just for a wee while—I'll no trouble ye lang. What, ye're gane? Aweel, it's nae wonder—I'm no your mither, lass. But, oh, gin I had my ain dochter! Alice, Alice!"

The heart wrung cry was suddenly stopped. While she called, Marion saw, or fancied she saw, looking in at the frosted window-panes, a face, which by the dim light of fading day seemed that of a young woman. But there was a likeness in it that made a thrill of awe come over her—a likeness unseen for twenty years.

She said to herself—"It maun be that my end is near; and that my mither is come back—come frae the grave to 'tak me hame,' as she said. Aweel, I'm ready; I downa care to bide langer. But oh, mither, gin I had, like ye a dochter to close my een! Oh! that she were here—my bairn Alice!"

While she was speaking the face had vanished; but with her latter words it reappeared. Sweet it was, and tender in aspect, wearing that fair and angelic look always given by golden hair. Well might the sick woman have mistaken it for a vision from the land of the blessed. But as its eyes met hers, they took a human look almost amounting to grief. Marion began to doubt.

"It's like her, yet it's no hersel. It's nae spirit, for it stands dark atween me and the sky. Is it my bairn that I wished might bear my mither's likeness? Is it my bairn that I haena seen for seven years? Alice, Alice!"

"I am here, mother," was the answer heard indistinctly through the open door.

Marion uttered a great cry. She tried to raise herself, but her limbs were powerless.

"In the name o' God! my dochter, come ben!" Alice stepped over the doorway and came in.

She stood in the middle of the room, a maiden of seventeen years. Her features had sharpened out into distinct form and thoughtful beauty. She was neither like her mother nor her father, except in the color of her hair, but bore the likeness which Marion had so desired when she gave her first-born the name of Alice—her own mother's name. So strong was the resemblance, that, when the girl stood, still afar off, in her white clothing, with her hands loosely folded together and her eyes bent tenderly forward, the sick woman looked at her daughter with a sort of awe,

as if there had still been some reality in her first fancy, and Alice were indeed a vision from the dead.

"Are ye my bairn?" she whispered solemnly. "Are ye flesh and blude—*my* flesh and *my* blude—my ae dochter that I bore?"

Alice approached, and stood at her mother's feet.

"I am your bairn. Will ye take me, mother, for this night? I was so wearying to come home."

"My bairn—my dear Alice—my lassie true and kind!" cried the mother, stretching out longing arms. But in vain, for her strength was gone.

"I canna reach ye," she said piteously. "I'm sair changed and weak. I do naething but murn and murn a' the day. Ye maun tak your puir auld mither to your arms, Alice, for she canna tak ye in hers."

Alice looked surprised, anxious, grieved, at the worn face, and the gray hairs which had come before their time. For though Mistress Learmont was not old, the cares and sorrows of her life, its poverty and its toil, had made her seem like a woman far gone in years. Her beauty had faded; all except the one charm that she could not lose—the mild patience which sat like a glory in her eyes. It touched Alice as something new—something never seen in Fairyland. It subdued her so, that she, in all her loveliness of unclouded youth, came near, and bending down lowly, knelt before her sick mother, and threw round the shivering frame her shining arms.

"Are ye come back, my dearie? come back for gude and a'?" whispered Marion, giving herself up to the uncontrollable joy.

Alice sighed; ay, a real sigh, the first the mother had ever heard on her lips. "Nay, we will not speak of that. I am here now. They let me come the minute the sun set, because my longings made their power weak. Are you glad to see me, mother?"

"Glad, my bairn!" echoed Marion, in a tone that was sufficient answer.

Her daughter looked round, half curiously, yet with a mingling of interest. "It's the same place, I see, the room where I and my brothers played so merrily. Where's Hughie, mother?"

"He's gane wi' the rest to follow the pleugh, or fetch the kye hame; or maybe he's awa to some ploy or ither. He's a pawky lad—our Hugh."

"Does he mind of me, mother?"

"Ay; often they callants talk o' wee Alice that was wi' them seven years syne; and ance when Hughie was missing on the hills for a day and a night, he cam hame saying he had been dreaming that he fell intil the Tweed, and that his sister Alice saved him. He kent nae mair. But 'twas unco strange."

Nothing did Alice say, for she knew that those who return from Fairyland have no clear remembrance of aught that has happened to them there. Only thinking of her brother Hugh and of that wondrous journey, she smiled pensively.

In her smile the likeness she bore grew stronger. Marion watching her, saw it. She took her daughter's face between her hands, and said:

"Look sae ance mair, Alice! Ye're her very picture. I didna see't till this day, when ye're grown a woman, grave and dowie like. Ye hae her een, and her bonnie bree wi' the hair lying soft aboon; only yours is bright as gowd, and hers was like threads of siller—my puir auld mither! But I'm glad ye're like her, Alice; I'm unco glad!"

Her voice was trembling through tears; her words, feeble, "maundering," and long drawn out, bespoke the wandering fancies of sickness. When she ceased, her head sank back exhausted on the pillow.

Alice stood wistfully regarding that—to her—strange new sight—disease and pain.

"What ails you, mother! What can I do for you?" she asked, more by the human and womanly instinct within her, than by any deeper feeling.

"I'm very sick, Alice, and I hae nobody to tend me. Oh, gin ye'd gie me a drink, and bathe my bree, and kame my hair," she moaned, looking imploringly at her daughter.

Alice rose up and went about the house, not as in years before, with flaunting childish mien, but with the grave light footsteps of maidenhood. She went—all in her bright clothing, still redolent of the odors of Fairyland; she brought the light and got ready the cool drink—doing things which she had never done before, but which her earthly nature instinctively taught her.

"Ah, it's sweet, sae sweet," murmured the sick woman, receiving, for the first time, the cup from her daughter's hand. "Ilka thing tastes gude frae ye, my lassie, as my ain mither was wont to say to me lang syne. God help thae puir auld bodies that hae ne'er a dochter!"

Alice smiled, and in her cheek, always so clear, rose a transparent flush of pleasure—pleasure quite different to what was so called in Elfland.

Her mother, a little revived, sat up in the bed, and looked at her once more; it seemed as if she could never tire of such gazing, which absorbed all thought, but of the present.

"Ye're a sweet lassie, Alice—and fair to see. But I dinna like thae brows—they're not fit for a puir man's brain," said she, touching the glittering robes, armlets, and jewels, or what seemed such—with which her daughter was adorned. Alice looked vexed.

"Aweel, my dearie, I wadna grieve ye. Only it gars ye seem as if ye were a grand leddy, and no my ain dochter;—whilk, maybe, is but the truth," added she, sadly.

Alice sat a minute in thought; then, without speaking, she went to the corner where thick in dust hung some of her mother's garments, long unworn through sickness. She stripped off all her shining gauds, and dressed herself in these coarse clothes, which, while somewhat hiding her form, made her sweeter and fairer, because more like a mortal maiden.

"Ah! I ken ye now—ye're my ain, my ain," cried the mother embracing her. "Ye'll loe me—and tend me—and never, never part frae me!"

The girl sighed, but made no answer; and began quietly to fulfil all a daughter's offices toward the sick woman. She bathed her face, and taking off her cap, let down the hair already turned to gray. Alice paused, with the locks in her hand.

"Are you very old, mother? Will you never be young and fair-looking any more? Do all people that live on earth grow feeble as you?"

"In time—my bairn—in time! But it's naething. I was a bonny lass mysel, ance—when I married your father, and even when I brought ye into the world. But I forget a' that. It's sweeter to be an auld wife, and hae a bonnie dochter smilin' near. Then, a body isna feared for growin' auld."

Her cheerful look as she leaned forward and let Alice comb her gray hair, was almost like the smile of young Marion Learmont, when, seventeen years before, she sat tying the fatal green round the cradle of her expected babe. Her overlaid heart heaved a sigh of entire content; and again and again she drew Alice closer, to look into her young face and admire the maidenly beauties of her form. In the maternal love was an exulting pride, almost as strong as that with which a young man watches the dawning perfections of his mistress—a pride which none can know or understand but a mother who beholds her only daughter woman-grown, and feels her own youth restored in the fair completeness of what was once a frail baby-life trembling at her breast.

An hour passed in this deep serenity of joy; and then Meg Brydon came creeping in, eyeing with shame and discomfiture her forsaken mistress.

"Gang your gate, Meg," said Mistress Learmont, cheerfully. "I will need ye nae mair; I hae my ain dochter, that's come hame this nicht. Look ye here, Meg Brydon—isna she a bonnie lass?"

But Meg, frightened at the apparition of the fair creature that sat beside Mistress Learmont's bed, and remembering all the tales of the stolen Alice, took hastily to flight. The mother and daughter were left together, as before.

"We'll be our lane the hale nicht, maist likely," said Ma-

tion to her child. "It's New Year's night, ye ken, and your father and the three callants are down at Meirose, keeping Hogmanay. I forbade them to bide at hame—dout and dowie wi' me. But, my Alice, I kenn'd na then I wad hae thee!"

So amidst long talk and sweet pauses of silence, the night passed away. Then, for the first time, Alice heard the things pertaining to simple earthly lore; of precious home-bonds; of afflictions softened by tenderness; of trials made holy by patience; of human sorrows, that go hand-in-hand with human joys, of evil enhancing good; of wrong creating forbearance; and long suffering, ever present love, reigning triumphant over all.

These many things did Marion Learmont teach unto her daughter, though so unconsciously that any stranger listening would have said that it was merely an "auld wife claverin'" to a young girl about former days, and her own past life, together with the events of her family. Nothing wonderful she told—only that history which belongs to every household and every individual, in all times ancient or modern, of which the text, adduced either as example or warning, perpetually is, or ought to be, these words—the honey of the world's bitter cup—"My little children, love one another."

It might be about ten o'clock at night, when the solitude of Marion Learmont and her daughter was broken by voices at the door without.

Alice trembled, and instinctively clung to her mother's hand.

"Oh, hold me fast; just a little while longer," she whispered, eagerly.

"What for do ye fear, my lassie? It's naebody but your ain father, and your brithers three, stand and let them see ye, my dochter."

With a sweet and bashful grace, her face yet pale from the unexplained terror, Alice stood—a vision of beauty—before her rough sire and her three wild brothers. They were utterly confounded.

"What's this, Marion?" said the late archer of Queen Mary's guard, stooping his yellow locks, now growing grizzled and thin, near his ailing wife, and trying to lower his strong voice so as not to jar upon her feeble ear.

"It's our Alice, our first-born. She's come hame. Gie her your blessing."

"Eh, our Alice that was stown awa?" said Thomas Learmont, who, like all recovered mortals, was utterly oblivious of the past, and bore no memory of the stream in Fairyland, or the little Elfin daughter that used to visit him there. "Alice come back! Sure, lass, I'm unco glad to see ye!"

He took her in her sturdy arms, and his hearty parental kiss resounded over the whole house.

"Whar hae ye been, ye foolish lassie? ye hae caused us mickle dule. Ye suld hae come back for your puir mi her's sake, that needs a lass-bairn to tend on her, instead of thae big callants and mysel, though we aye do our best. But ye'll fare better now, Marion woman!"

He patted his wife's shoulder with his huge hand, and she looked up tenderly at him. Times were changed with them, and they were changed too—except in the affection which on both sides had lasted, and would last, until the end.

Meanwhile the three lads had hung back, oppressed with the uncouth shyness peculiar to their age. Only Hugh among them took courage to lift up his eyes and speak to sister Alice. He had grown a sturdy fellow, less bonnie, perhaps, than in childhood, but with the promise of becoming a Learmont worthy even as True Thomas of a Queen of Fairies' love.

His sister came and looked up in his face—a decided looking up, for she was a wee creature always, quite elf-like in proportion when standing beside her big brother of thirteen years old.

"Hughie, dear! won't you speak to me?"

Hughie cast his eyes upon her shyly, but tenderly. "Ay,

"I'll do that; I mind ye now, sister Alice, and a' the things I dreamed about ye; and," he added, mysteriously, "I ken ye hae been wi' the gude neighbors, and I hae sought ye in alka green ring, and aye, at Hallowe'en, but couldna find ye. You're found now! Oh, but we'll keep Hogmanay fine!"

As a mild way of expressing his feelings Hughie tossed up his bonnet in the air, and executed a brief fragment of a reel, which drove Habbie and Sandy out of the reach of his legs with great precipitation.

"Ye're richt, lad," said his father, turning round with a loud, cheerful laugh. "Auld wife, it's our blithest New Year yet, and we'll keep it brawly, sitting here wi' a' our bairns round us!"

"Save ane," whispered the mother, "wee Willie, that's sittin' this ae night in heaven at His feet."

Thomas Learmont took off his bonnet, so did the lads; and there was silence in the house for a minute. It was a pause consecrated to the memory of the one lamb lost out of the flock to be gathered into the safe fold of the Great Shepherd.

Then began the merriment of Hogmanay—kept as merrily in those olden days as now. Parents and children gathered round the fire, which, for this occasion only, was piled up with faggots that would have done honor to the time when the wine ran red, and the hospitable ingle blazed perpetually in the Tower of Ereildoun. The young Learmonts sported, shouted, and danced; but when the uproar grew too wild, Alice's gentleness fell like dew upon the other three, softening rudeness or contention, coming among her troop of brothers to be what a sister can always be: the healer of discord, the soother, the refiner.

All these things she had learned, partly by nature—her mother's nature, which was inherent in her, and partly by the sudden instinct, developed at once, during the few hours when she had lain listening to that mild speech which first put all a daughter's emotions in her heart.

She was very happy too. Aye, though on this memorable night, when she began to feel altogether like a maiden of earth, she grew hungry, and the food was coarse; weary, and was startled by her father's loud laugh, so different from the lulling melodies of Fairyland; though oftentimes her brothers' noisy play jarred upon her delicate senses, and their rough caresses half-frightened her, still she was happy. She had learned for the first time the great secret of all human happiness—family love.

The hour came, the eerie time between the night and the day, between the past and coming year—the hour which had brought Alice into the world. As the clock chimed, Thomas Learmont took his first-born and only daughter in his arms and blessed her; while the parental love, which is an instinct in a mother, but in a father is usually the growth of years and dependent on external sympathies, rose to his heart and fell in drops from his manly eyes.

Then her mother kissed her fondly, and afterward her brothers did the same, awkwardly and shyly, as all brothers do at the age when the testifying of household affections seems to them undignified. In fact, a positive sin against the independence of boyhood. All said, "God bless thee, Alice—our Alice!" and she felt that she was, indeed, one of them, ready to share all things with them through good and evil; that the solitary delights of Elfland were desired by her no more.

"Now, gang to your bed, my dochter," said Mistress Learmont tenderly, when, the New Year having fairly commenced, the three lads were dispatched to sleep and quietness during the only portion of the twenty-four hours that they ever were quiet. "But yet I canna tane ye for an hour."

"Oh, do not, mother," sighed Alice, while the olden shadow of fear troubled her face. "Hold me fast—fast; let me not go."

"Ay, the lass is skeered. Nae doubt; the place looks drearie like—bide ye wi' your mither, Alice," said Thomas Learmont kindly, as he rolled himself in his plaid and lay down at the outer door.

So Alice, exhausted with a joy that made her feel weak and trembling like any earthly maiden, crept gladly to the maternal breast.

She had not slept there long when she was awakened with the dawn glimmering into her eyelids. Very soon that dim ray was swallowed up in one far brighter. The whole house was filled with light, and thrilled with delicious music.

Alice knew it well. The sweet summons reached her as one of doom. It was the fairy people come to take her away.

Shuddering, she listened, and with an instinct natural and child-like, yet alas! to her so new, tried to wake her mother. But Marion Learmont slept soundly, with a sweetly smile on her worn face, which in this happiness seemed almost to have renewed its youth. She slept as if a deep spell was upon her, binding her to her child's peril. Only in sleep she held her arms so tightly round her, that Alice felt a kind of safety in her fold. From thence the poor maiden looked out and watched the elfin people gathering round the bed.

"Come, Alice; come, pretty Alice," sang they, amidst their gambols. "Are you not weary of these coarse laidly mortals? Come back to us, quick!"

"Oh, let me stay a little longer," implored the girl. "I am so tired of dancing and singing. I had rather bide at home."

"Hey ho!" laughed out the Elf-queen, stepping lightly into the ring, "this is something quite new. What has come over my young hand-maiden? She would like to stay in a wretched tumble-down dwelling where the rain always comes in and the smoke never goes out; and to live with such people, too! Entering the door, which he left open to stretch his feet through, I had to step over such a lumbering carcass of a mortal. Faugh! is my young Thomas Learmont come to this? a thing with grizzled hair and coarse hands!"

"He is my father, my kind, good father," cried Alice.

"And that woman there, how ugly; why, I could lay my little finger in each of her wrinkles."

"My mother, my own mother that I love!" Alice answered, as she turned and pressed her young lips to every furrow marked in the withered brows.

The elves set up a shout of derision.

"Nay, Alice," said the queen, her silvery laughter making a pleasant under-tone of melody, "this may be all very well for some common tastes, but not for a descendant of my True Thomas, who gave up all for me. Ay, all! though the Tower of Ereildoun was a home rich and fair, while this is a poor cottage;—though he was held the noblest knight in all Scotland, while you are just a farmer's lass. Be wise, simple one; come back to former ways and former delights."

At her signal the elves began to dance the old delicious measures which Alice remembered well. So strong was the enchantment that she had need to close her eyes and stop her ears lest she should be allured against her will. Had it not been that her mother's arms were so closely locked around her, perhaps she would even have leaped forth and joined the rout of frantic pleasure.

All at once it paused, melting into delicious, soul-enticing music, through which was only heard the voice of the Elf-queen, murmuring, "Alice, come."

She lifted her head and said firmly, "I will not come."

There was a loud and angry wail, like that of the wind tearing the trees, a rolling like thunder, and in these sounds the music died.

"Do as you list, foolish mortal," Alice heard uttered in a sharp, sarcastic voice by her side, though she saw nothing. "It matters not to us, for you soon will be ours. It is daylight, and we must be away to Fairyland, while those arms still hold you safe from our power. But by the next twilight, when the shadows fall grey behind Eildon Hill, ha! ha! ha! Foolish Alice, foolish Alice, when this is the seventh year, and a mortal fair as you will please the Fiend well. Ho, ho!"

A shout of angry laughter shook the roof; the elves vanished, and the whole house lay silent in the dawn.

Mistress Learmont woke, and tremblingly felt for her daughter. Her beloved Alice lay in her bosom, quite still and pale, with open eyes watching the sunbeams creep along the floor. It was the first time Marion had ever seen that face in daylight—the first time Alice had ever beheld the sun—the warm, healthy, labor-inspiring, earth-risen sun.

"Is this morning?" she said, softly, turning her eyes, full of strange pensiveness, on her mother.

"It is, my bairn; God be wi' ye on this braw New Year."

Alice was silent. She scarce understood the blessing; it belonged to a lore not taught in Fairyland. Soon afterward she said, still keeping her thoughtful look—

"Mother, how long do you call a day—from twilight to twilight?"

"It's unco short now, frae sunrise to sunset; we hae scarce time for the work that maun be dune."

"Nor I," said Alice, sadly. "Mother, may I rise?"

She rose accordingly; and Marion Learmont beheld her daughter moving about the house like other mortal daughters, ready to fulfill all the duties that it behooved her to learn. Very pale and clear Alice's features looked in the bright daylight. There was even a wan unearthly aspect about her—a weariness and painful repose. All the day she comported herself thus; doing whatsoever became her station, and doing it in a manner that seemed as if she had been used to it all her life. Only when the neighbors came in to stare at her, and some marveled at her wondrous grace, and some jested bitterly about Thomas Learmont's lost daughter, who had come back they knew not from where, Alice would shrink away and hide herself by her mother's side, where alone she seemed to find entire content and rest.

It was a dull winter day, and the forenoon had scarcely passed, when black rain clouds grew heavy over Eildon Hill. As they darkened, evermore Alice's sweet face darkened too. She would pause continually in her light labor or her pleasure and talk, and look sorrowfully at her mother, as if she could not find speech to tell her pain. As the afternoon closed in, and the mid-day meal being over, the fathers and brothers went back to their toil—Alice, sitting with her mother, grew continually sadder and sadder. Nevertheless, she went about the house, heaped fagots on the fire, prepared food, and did everything in neat order, so as to be comfortable for the one she loved.

She took one other precaution before she came and sat down at her mother's side—she bolted and barred the doors, leaving no entrance from without, but she did it with a despairing look, as though she knew that all was in vain.

About dusk Marion Learmont fell asleep; but waking soon after asked for water. Alice brought her a pitcherful.

"Ah, not that my bairn; I wad like a draught frae that bonnie burn, ye see," said she, with feverish longing. "It's no mony steps frae this, and it rins ower pebbles sae fresh and clear. Alice, will ye gang?"

Alice sighed, as though knowing all that would follow from this request, so meekly and unconsciously made. But there was no resisting the mother's desire. She took up her pitcher, and went.

She came back again, very pale, with quick, wild steps. There was a sound following her, like the sougning of an angry wind, though nothing could be seen.

Hurriedly the girl put the cup to her mother's lips.

"Drink, mother, drink, and then kiss me; for I must go."

"Whar, my lassie?"

"Far away, far away, with those you know. They drag me, they constrain me. Mother, I cannot stay!"

Her voice was almost a scream, and she writhed like one struggling with invisible hands.

"Oh, remember me, mother, and I'll remember you. And oh! keep Hughie safe, that he comes no more into their power, where I stay miserable and against my will."

"Then ye sall be saved, my bairn," cried the mother, rising from her first numbed terror into supernatural strength.

"He that gave ye to me, He that is the keeper o' your saul.

is greater than they that hand ye fast. He winna leave ye to perish. He will help your mither to save ye. How maun I do't? Tell me, Alice, my ae dochter, my first-born, sent by God!"

As she uttered the great Name a wild and mournful cry arose. With it was mingled Alice's voice:

"Ay! save me, mother. Stand at the four cross roads, on the eve of Roodmass, when we all ride. Ye'll see me. Snatch me, and hold me fast, and have no fear. Oh! save me, mother, mother!"

It was only a voice that spoke—nothing more. Alice had melted out of sight. Her cry of "Save me, save me!" died away in distance and silence; and the mother heard nothing—felt nothing, but the bitter winter wind blowing through the open door.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAR, far through all the black depths of the underground world, did the elves bear their changeling maiden; now, for the first time, an unwilling and sorrowful prey. Feeble and exhausted she was too, even like any mortal girl, worn out by weeping and regret.

"Now, Alice, thou art the most foolish damsel on earth," said the blithesome queen, who had not feeling enough to be either angry or revengeful. "To think of your desiring to remain behind, and crying your sweet eyes blind because the thing was impossible. Look, how near shines the golden gate; soon we will be once more in Fairyland."

But Alice wept on.

"I never knew such a provoking little mortal. Don't go on dreaming, Alice. Look at this stream we have to cross."

The girl looked mechanically. Well she knew the shallow river, which, with many another, she had waded through again and again, while the light elves skimmed along the top. But, while in the midst of its current, she cast her eyes down, shuddered and screamed: she saw it as she had never seen before—a river of blood!

"What, you dislike that!" said the Queen of Fairies. "Really, how very particular my handsome maiden has grown; worse by far than the Knight of Ercildoun, whom I led hither. It is only the blood spilt on earth which drips down to Fairyland. We have no objection; it makes our streams a brighter color, that is all. Come across, my little maid."

In an agony Alice struggled to the shore, unharmed, save by a few red drops that clung to her robe.

"It is the blood of Geordie Grahame, slain by your father the day you were born," observed the queen, carelessly. "But no matter, the next stream we cross will wash it out. Ay, and you may drink of that," she continued, as Alice lay exhausted beside another rivulet, which ran clear and sparkling, though with a perfectly silent flow.

Dying with thirst, Alice dipped in her hollowed hand, and put it to her lips, but the water was salt and bitter.

"Drink, silly maiden! It is only the tears shed on earth, coming down hither. Mortal women—and your mother especially—help to keep the river continually flowing. Pry! thee, Alice, do not add to the wave."

"Ah me!" cried Alice, "and it is through blood and tears that I must pass, and have passed, to reach the land of pleasure."

No more she spake, but fell heavily on the ground so often traversed with delight, but which she now with opened eyes saw to be a delusive and a thorny way.

"Oh, these mortals, these mortals!" petulently exclaimed the Queen of Fairies. "But take her up, my elves, and bring her safe through the golden gate; it is quite impossible that our peace can be disturbed by an earth-born creature's lamentings outside the portals of Fairyland. Once within there she will, of course, be content, and we will have a few extra feasts and junketings. The glory of our kingdom is concerned; for, my subjects, the fact is"—and her majesty shrugged her shoulders—"we may not keep anything human long, if altogether against its will. As my Knight

of Ercildoun foretold, we may have to give her up at last, but we'll keep the creature as long as we can."

Having delivered herself of this dignified harangue, to which the bells of her palfrey rang applause, the queen spurred on and entered the fair gates of her kingdom.

There, silently leaning against the portals which he might never pass, sometimes looking wistfully through their transparent net-work, sometimes striking momentary chords on the harp that hung always at his side, stood Thomas of Ercildoun.

His countenance brightened when he saw the queen—his adored ever; though like many another bard, he had worshiped no reality, but only the dream of his own poet-heart.

"Are ye come back, my lady and love?" said he, advancing; "and hae ye brought young Alice Learmont?"

"Ay, at last; and not content with a whole night and a day on earth, she wanted to abide there constantly. She is as discontented as you are sometimes, my knight, only with much more cause, since she has never a true-love here in Fairyland."

The Rhymer looked with glittering eyes at the small elfin form that wreathed itself about him in sprite-like, child-like vagaries. Even in her caressing moods, the fairy-lady had an inconstant, butterfly air; there was nothing in her of the quiet, tender, woman-nature which will cling to what it loves, because it loves, and loving cannot choose but cling. Yet very witching—in any shape—was the Rhymer's love!

He watched her, still overcome by the glamour which had never entirely passed away. But at last his eye turned to where Alice Learmont lay in a state of death-like unconsciousness, which quite puzzled the elves. They were trying all means to awake her; some buzzing about her in the shape of bees, others putting on the tiny feathers of birds, and warbling close in her ears; and the rest shouting her name, their call sounding like dim echoes heard among woodlands. But there she lay, white and motionless, save for the slow tears that came stealing under her eyelids. Her bitter grief was upon her still.

It penetrated the mortal nature of the Bard of Ercildoun.

"Let me gang till her," said he to the queen. "She comes o' my blude—the earthly blude that throbs in my heart still. Like can comfort like. I'll ask at the lassie why she grieves sae sair."

"Away with you, True Thomas; only take need;" and the queen shook her dainty finger warningly. "I cannot spare any more mortals of the Learmont race, after him that truly was well spared, the great burly archer of Melrose."

She flitted away, her elves careering after her in merry whirls on the grass, or in airy eddies like dust-clouds, leaving the coast clear for Thomas the Rhymer and his descendant.

He approached Alice softly, nay reverently; for he saw in her the traces of that earthly suffering which from himself had for centuries passed away. Pensive he was, but the faint shadow on his brow was nothing to Alice's utter despair. She lay and wept like one who would not be comforted.

He called her by her name, but she answered not. Then in a tone as gentle as a woman, he said:

"My dochter!"

Alice started up with a great cry.

"Who calls me thus? Oh, mother, mother! have you come after me all the way to this cruel land?"

But she saw nothing except the green grass and the hazy, shadowless trees standing up in their places, while underneath them, as upright and as still, stood the Rhymer.

"It is no your mither that speaks," said he. "It is my ain sel, that ye ken weel—your ancestor, Thomas Learmont, of Ercildoun, that mony hundred years syne wonned away to Fairyland, and was never seen mair."

Alice came nearer, and there was life and interest in her eyes. "Are you from Tweedside, a mortal, and of my kin?"

"Ye heard a' that—lang syne."

"I heard, but heeded not. I scarce heeded anything

till yesternight, when I hearkened to my mother. Oh, mother! will I never hear your voice any more?"

"Did she tell ye aught concerning me?" asked the Rhymer, eagerly. "Or is my name clean forgot amang my ain folk and i' the land I lo'ed sae weel?"

Alice put her hand to her brow. "Wait till I think of what she said. Aye, it is clear now." And she looked up in his face steadily. "You were the Knight of Ercildoun; and you left everything—home, parents, young wife, and innocent babe—to go with a beautiful lady into Fairyland for seven years. Then you came back, and lived as a good knight should. As last she summoned you—the Queen of Fairies—and you went away again—forever. Oh! how could you go, having once come back to the dear earth?"

The Rhymer sunk his head, murmuring, "I canna tell. It was to be, and it was sae."

"And how returned you? Ah, show me the way. Teach me how to go back to my dear mother and my brother Hugh."

She flung herself at his feet, embracing them in her agony of entreaty!

"Ye ken there's but ane way," said the Rhymer, gently; "to bide here till spring dawns on the earth; and at the time o' Roodmass the fairies ride. Gin your mither loe ye still, ye may be saved, Alice Learmont. Gie thanks to her th' yestreen ye didna tine your saul," added he in an awful whisper.

Alice looked up, trembling.

"Ye kentna that while ye lay saft i' your mither's arms, there cam up that black road the Evil Ane, him that goes about like a ramping and a roaring lion. He took back nae mortal, but an elf, as the teind to hell. Ye're safe, my bairn, gin your heart fail not, nor your mither's luvie."

While the seer spoke, the solitude of the wood where they sat was broken by the entrance of the fairy troop. Little heed the elves took of the mortals, being absorbed in their own delights. They came on with songs and laughter, and sat down to golden banquet-tables, that sprang out of the ground like mushrooms. Alice, half dead with hunger, thirst and exhaustion, looked on, but came not nigh. The feast ended, they broke forth into mad revelries; music that allured the very soul, and dances that whoever saw must needs dance after—were it through bush, bramble or brier.

Alice pressed her eyelids forcibly down to shut out the sight—once so familiar—which she felt was controlling her senses, and luring her back beyond recall.

"Oh, mother, mother!" she murmured, and strove to think of the dim cottage, and the sick bed, and her who lay there, moaning her heart away for the loss of her child. But still the fairy spell was too strong, and drew the girl's feet nearer and nearer to the enchanting scene.

"Oh, keep me back," she cried, turning to what seemed her only stay—him who had once been a mortal like herself. But still the words were words only; continually she moved nearer and nearer to the dazzling rout.

Thomas the Rhymer looked after her with doubtful eyes. "It maunna be," said he, thoughtfully; "all that I hae tint, I hae tint; but this lassie, so tender and sae fair—Alice Learmont!" added he, calling her by her earthly name, with a severe and firm voice.

The maiden paused, even though her feet were just touching the magic ring.

"Whar are ye gaun? Hae ye forgotten your mither?"

Alice paused, sighed and stood irresolute.

"Will ye be saved?" asked the Rhymer.

"I cannot—I cannot! their power is too strong for me," sobbed Alice; "yet, oh, my mother."

At the word, Thomas of Ercildoun drew her to the brink of a little rivulet that crept through the wood; just a slender rill, coming from the one river of earth that flowed through Fairyland. He dipped his fingers in the water, sprinkled her eye-lids, and made on them a sign, in his days held most sacred, and still revered as a memorial of holy things—the cross. Then he bade her open her eyes and see.

Alice saw—but oh, with what changed vision.

All the fair wood, alive with flickering leaves and waving plants, had become a forest of bare, lifeless trees. The foliage had dropped off their boughs, the flowers had withered where they grew. There was no beauty, no pleasure therein; nothing but discordant voices, and a dead blank of sight and sound.

Shuddering, Alice ran forward to seek her old companions; ay, any companionship at all in the desolate place. But the banquet-hall had faded into ruins; the dainties were only so many withered leaves the golden tables nothing but fungi and ugly incrustations of blasted trees; the gay draperies around mere spider-webs, flittering to and fro in the gusty wind.

The girl would have shrieked, but the same spell which had opened her eyes had sealed her lips for the time. Vainly she looked round for Thomas the Rhymer; he had disappeared. She wandered along the paths she knew, yet sometimes doubtful of her way, so changed was everything, until she reached the dell where the Queen of Fairies kept her favorite court.

"Welcome, welcome, Alice!" shouted the elves in the distance. But their voices, once so sweet, now sounded discordant as ravens hooting from a crumbling tower. And, coming nearer, the maiden beheld them clear.

Oh, horror! There was a ghastly, loathly hag sitting on a throne, laughing loudly through her toothless lips, her yellow, shrunken limbs peering ugly beneath foul rags that were disposed as jauntily as if they had been rich clothing. There was a court of withered, worn-looking creatures, that in their uncomely age imitated the frolics of youth. All things about them were pale and unsubstantial, jaded, comfortless, and drear. Yet they seemed not to know it, but in all this wretched guise played the same antics, and with their cracked hoarse voices sang the same songs, which had once been so enchanting. Every thing was as it had ever been—only from it the glamour had gone.

"Ye see the truth now," said a mournful whisper in Alice's ear; and the Rhymer stood behind her.

"And do you see it thus?" asked the shuddering girl.

"Maybe, not sae fearsome as it is in your een. For I am ane o' them, and we maun a' cheat ane anither, until the end; but I ken weel that, whate'er it seems, it is even sae."

So saying, with a mechanical footstep, neither hurried nor slow, he went into the magic ring and lay down at the feet of the ghastly queen—who, under whatever guise he beheld her, was doomed to be his object of worship evermore.

But Alice, shrinking away with terror and disgust, hid herself in the solitary wood. There she stayed for days and weeks, lying on withered fern, and feeding scantily on berries that came from seeds of earth drifted along by the earthly rivulet. Perpetually there came by her portions of the elfin shows, which had once seemed so pleasant, but were now so foul. She joined them not; in misery and repentance and pain, did she bide her time, until the season of the Fairies' Raid came round.

One evening, when she sat on the brink of the stream—which alone of all the sights in fairyland, kept its freshness and beauty—she saw drifting by one of those branches covered with soft, woolly leaf-buds, which, appearing at Easter, are to this day called palms.

As she looked, Thomas, of Ercildoun, whom she had not seen for long, appeared at her side, watching likewise the little bough.

"Alice," said he, "ye hae received your sign. It is spring time on the bonnie meadows o' Tweedside. When the next gloaming fa's it will be the eve o' Roodmass."

He had scarcely spoken, when the gathering summons stirred up all the dwellers in Fairyland. On they came, clustering in throngs round the entrance gate, collecting what had once seemed their gallant nags and palfreys, but which now Alice saw only to be only hemp-stalks, and bean-wands, and withered boughs of trees, on which the skeleton leaves, waving and rustling, made what appeared the glitter of golden housings, and the music of bridles ringing.

Hoarsely resounded the universal call, for on this, the first

of the two grand yearly festivals, no one, elfin or mortal, might be absent from the fairies' raid—except him, who coming of his own will, had lost the power of revisiting earth.

Slowly he followed, lingering until already the first pageant had passed through the gates, and Alice, the last of all, waited with eager longings until she herself was allowed to depart.

The Rhymer stood watching her with sorrowful yearnings.

"Fare-ye-weel, Alice; I see a' things clear. Mither's love is strong, and mither's prayers stronger. Ye pass the gate that ye will enter nae mair. Fare-ye-weel!"

Alice trembled with joy. She prepared to go; bathed her naked, bruised feet in the little stream, and drew round her the poor rags that had once seemed the gaudy robes of Elfinland. Still, ere she left she turned round with kind tears to the Rhymer, her ancestor.

"My father, can I do aught for you? Should I reach safe the dear earth—our earth—is there no power—no prayers that could avail?"

He shook his head mournfully. "Na, na! the time is past. Gin I were ever found on the fair earth, it wad be but as a heap o' white banes crumbling i' the kirkyard o' Melrose. That a man sowed, he shall even reap; I maun dree my wierd, until the world's ending. Hereafter, there's Ane that maun do as His mercy wills wi' my erring saul."

Ceasing—he folded his hands and cast down his eyes, so majestic yet so sad. His descendent had no more to urge.

Once more only the Rhymer spoke, but in a low voice, and humbly even as a mortal penitent. "Alice ae word. When a' chances as it will chance, gang ye to the chapel by Ercildoun, and look out for a gray stane I raised, aneath the whilk I thocht that I and mine were to sleep. There'll sure be there my son Thomas, and ane that was aye a gude wife to me. Alice, say ten masses for their sauls."

So said he, not thinking of the centuries that had swept away all traces of the living and the dead alike, nor that mere tradition kept alive the name of Thomas of Ercildoun.

Alice made him little answer, for she hardly understood his meaning, and her whole heart and thoughts were flying earthward, in longing and in love.

One by one, the fairy train passed out from the gate, and last of all the mortal maiden passed out likewise.

"Fare-ye-weel, Alice," sounded behind her like a sigh; and looking back, she saw the Rhymer standing, dimly visible through the ragged mould-encrusted bars which had once seemed gold. His harp had fallen on the ground, his arms were folded on his breast, and his eyes, that could not weep, were bent forward with the mournfulness of a yearning never to be fulfilled. "Fare-ye-weel," he repeated once more; then turned himself, lifted up his beloved harp, and went back for ever into Fairyland.

CHAPTER IX.

It was early spring all over the Border country. The gowans in the pasture fields began to lift up their tiny heads, and the willows that grew in the windings of the Tweed put on downy buds, which the farmers' children call "geese and goslings." A few young lambs were tottering in the folds, and once or twice, when the noon was very warm and mild, a laverock had been heard singing high up in the still blue air, above the abbey-turrets of Melrose.

There was a woman, very pale and weak, but no longer sick—sitting under the shelter of the monastery walls. Every day when the weather was mild, she crawled out and sat there, anxious to gather up her strength to the utmost; and so she had done for weeks and months. Very quiet and composed she was; full of that serenity which is given by a firm purpose deeply buried in the heart. This purpose—so intense and resolved, had imparted strength and health even to Marion Learmont.

She sat a little way from the place where wee Willie's last cradle was made; lifting her head to the warm afternoon sunshine, and drinking in the pleasant air. Meg Brydon

not far off; sometimes twisting flax diligently—sometimes stretching her lazy length upon the graves.

There they remained, hour after hour, until the sun began to sink behind the hills; and from the near abbey, the few remaining monks of Melrose were heard chanting their feeble and unregarded vespers. For now the old religion of the Stuarts was dying away in all the land, and John Knox's preachings were everywhere heard instead of matins and evensong.

"Meg," said Mistress Learmont, suddenly calling.

The damsel appeared, from a gossip at the abbey gate.

"It's near the gloaming," said Marion, in a tremulous and rather excited tone. "Gang whar ye will, gude Meg; I'll just dauder hame my ain sel; I'm gey strong the noo. See!"

She rose, and with the aid of a stout hazel stick, marched steadily forward a few paces.

"Ye needna fash yoursel, lass," said she kindly, when Meg, whom so good a mistress had at last made a careful and devoted servant, tried to assist her steps. "Na, na; I'll e'en gang my lane; I maun do't," she added in a whisper to herself. "And He wha had on earth a mither o' His ain, will guide a waefu' mither this ae nicht."

She gently put her hand-maiden aside, and walked on alone. Only having gone a little way, she turned, and called back Meg, saying—

"Gin I'm ower lang o' comin,' tell the gudeman he needna fear. I'll be about wark in the whilk a Greater Ane than either husband or bairn will tak tent to me, and see that I come to nae harm. And Meg," she added, for the second time turning back to give directions. "Dear Meg, be an eident lass, and see that a' things are keepit braw for the gudeman and the wild callants, until the time that I come hame."

Her words so serious and gentle, had a deeper meaning than Meg could fathom. She was half inclined to follow, but something in her mistress's aspect forbade. She stayed behind, and Marion Learmont went on alone.

Past all her neighbors in Melrose town; past house after house, where the old wives sat knitting or spinning, and the children played in the gloaming, the mother went. No one spoke to her on the way; it seemed so strange to see the lone sick woman walking thus, that many thought it was Marion Learmont's wraith. And even those few who believed it was herself, saw such a wonderfully steadfast and absorbed expression in her face, that they were afraid to stop and address her. So on she went, leaning on her hazel staff, with her mantle thrown over her head and stooping form; and in her left hand nothing but a little book, which during her sickness a young minister, a follower of John Knox, had taught her to read. She left the town soon, and reached the open country. It was already so far dusk, that the sheep along the hill-side and in the fields looked like dots moving about; while everywhere was heard the tinkle of the bells, and the whistle of the shepherds coming home.

Marion distinguished a voice she knew and hid herself by the dyke-side, until those who were approaching had passed by. It was her husband and her three sons, returning from their daily labor on the farm. There came into her heart a terror—a longing, lest perchance she should never see them again, these dear ones—though by a natural yet mysterious instinct not held so dear as the one lost, who by her must yet be saved.

She dared not speak to them, lest they should overrule her plan; but she watched them with eager eyes, and followed them a little distance, stealing along under the shadow of the dyke and of the rowan trees that grew beside. She listened to their merry and unconscious voices.

"Eh," said Hughie. "I hear a soun' o' footsteps close by."

"It's naething but a bit maikin loupin' out of a whin-bush. Are ye feared for the like o' that?" answered the father, laughing.

"I'm no feared, father; but it's the eve o' Roodmass, when there's uncanny folk abroad," whispered the boy.

"Then we'll e'en gae hame, lads, for the gudewife's sake. She's easy fleyed, and she has aye a waefu' heart to bear. We maun tak tent o' the puir mither."

"Ay, ay," echoed the sons, moving forward bravely and quickly, and were soon out of sight.

The mother herself stood by the roadside, shedding many and mingled tears. But still her courage failed not, nor did she shrink from her purpose.

Very soon she came to a place where four roads met; a spot renowned throughout the whole neighborhood as being "uncanny." Tradition had faded concerning it—whether it was the scene of midnight murder, or of more harmless elfin tryste. Or perhaps the natural ghostliness of the place added to its ill name. It was an open moorland, except where a row of tall firs stood up, black sentinels, right against the sky; the wind in their tops keeping up a distant sougling peculiar to trees of that species. There is not a more eerie sound in nature, than the breeze passing through the high dark branches of a firwood.

Marion leant against one of the stems, exhausted, but not afraid. The gloaming was fast melting into night; the gloomy, cloudy night of early spring, when after the brief hour of sunset all things frequently seem passing again into dreariness and winter cold. The lonely woman began to shiver where she stood; and a heavy rain-cloud gathering over the moor, fell down in showers, drenching her even through her close mantle. All the moor vanished in haze; there was neither star nor moon. She could discern nothing except the near trees which in the mistiness around oftentimes seemed to stir and change their places, like great giants walking about in the night.

And yet—even yet—the mother was not afraid.

She had waited a long time; so long that she could have thought the night almost past, except that she knew the moon would rise at midnight, and it had not risen yet. Everything was quite dark.

At length she saw a bright light dancing across the moor, at the eastern horizon.

"It is but the moon rise," Marion said, and her heart grew colder than ever with disappointment and fear. "Wae's me! my hope is gane. Alice, Alice, I hae tint ye for ever-mair!"

Thus she, lamenting, hid her eyes from the light that grew broader and deeper, though no orb appeared to rise. When Marion looked again, there was a long stream of radiance glittering across the moor; and faintly approaching came another music than that of the wind in the fir-tops. It was—as a Nithsdale woman, who once heard the like, used to express it—"like the soun' o' a far awa' psalm."

Marion Learmont, even amidst her joy, trembled at the crisis that was approaching; for she knew that what she now saw and heard was the Fairies' Raid.

She crouched down behind the tree, muttering sometimes the unintelligible Aves and Cremos of her ancient faith; and then again bursting out into the heartfelt prayers taught by John Knox and his brethren. Alternately she clutched the Bible, or, forgetting herself, made the familiar sign of the cross. Mingled and strange were all her religious forms; but there was one thing that could not err, the intensity of devotion in her heart. And never once did she take her straining eyes from the sight on which was concentrated all her energy, courage and hope.

Nearer and nearer came the light, and separated itself into individual forms. Never had Marion Learmont seen such a glittering show. The elves rode one by one, men and women alternately. Their steeds, of all colors, were comparisoned with gold and jewels, that sparkled at every motion. They themselves were as fair to behold as when the young mother had seen them gathering in her chamber, on that fatal night of Alice's birth. She noticed, as before, their green kirtles, and their yellow hair, that while they rode streamed behind in a long train of light.

For the mortal mother beheld the elves but as mortals do, until they have abode in Fairyland long enough to learn

that all this show is but outward glamour, nothingness, and vanity.

The calvacade neared the tree, and Marion watched in agony for the first that should pass by. It was an elf, taller than the rest, whom she knew to be the Queen of the Faries. Afterward, scores upon scores of elfin horsemen rode near her; but the mother's eye lingered upon none. No doubt had she in her search;—through all that disguise she could not mistake her own child.

Each after the other, the whole train passed by, until there remained but one—who rode slower than the rest; and neither by voice nor merry gesture urged her palfrey on. She sat, amidst all the brilliant show of her attire, quite passive and silent. Only as her horse was sweeping past the cross-roads, she turned and leaned sideways showing distinctly her pale face and eager eyes. It was Alice herself.

Quick as lightning—strong as though she had never been sick—the mother leaped forward and dragged her child down from the palfrey. Instantly it melted away, and lay, a withered bramble bough, in the middle of the path. A loud wail ran across the moor; the fairy pageant vanished, and all was perfect silence.

For several minutes this hush lasted, during which neither mother nor daughter spoke. Marion was conscious of nothing save that she held in her arms her living, breathing Alice. After a little she loosened her clasp, trying to look in her daughter's face.

"Ah, hold me fast—let me not go," murmured the girl in terror.

And even while she spoke, there gradually arose across the moor a whirlwind of unearthly sounds—loud voices, screams, and laughter. It came nearer, eddying round on every side, dinning in Marion's ears so close that she started as though strange things were clutching at her—but nothing visible.

"Hold me fast—fast," was all Alice's cry.

"I will haud ye fast, my bairn that I bore," the mother answered, firmly. And so they stood, clinging together in the midst of that eldritch rout, the more fearful that it was only heard, not seen.

The blackness of the night changed a little, and the great round moon rose up from the edge of the moor. As soon as it gave sufficient light to distinguish objects, Marion gained some comfort. But her terror returned, when in the shadow cast by the bole of the opposite fir trees she saw something leaning. It was a human form, the very image of herself, except the face, which was hid.

"Turn your cloak, mother, and it will vanish," whispered Alice. "But oh, do not let go your hold of me."

Marion did as her child desired, and the illusion melted away.

This was the first of the elfin spells, through the fierce ordeal of which the mother passed the night. The next trial was far more horrible to bear.

Suddenly, in her very arms, the soft form of Alice seemed changing to that of a wild beast. "Hold me close, and I'll do ye no harm," screamed the voice, which alone was human. And still the brave mother held fast her own, until again she felt the warm maiden-flesh beating against her bosom.

After that, through every horror that elfin malice could plan, amidst transformations uncouth, loathsome, or terrible, did Marion Learmont keep her treasure close embraced. Sometimes she seemed to enfold a goblin shape, or had a slimy serpent crawling on her breast, or clasped with her bare arms a red-hot bar of iron; but through each change, foul or frightful, the mother knew and held fast to her own child. Many another mother through all human trials has lone the same!

At last the sky, which except just at moon-rise had been overcast all night, was brightened at the east with a streak of yellow and pale green. The elfin clamor began to die away in the dawn.

"Bide a wee, bide a wee," sighed the exhausted mother,

as after the last transformation her daughter lay almost like a corpse in her arms. "While I hae life I winna tine my bairn."

Ere she ceased speaking, there came a sound like a clap of thunder, mingled with howlings that might have risen from the bottomless pit. All around where Marion stood was flame, and it was a living flame that swayed to and fro in her arms.

"Hae pity on us, oh God!" shrieked the mother aloud. Instantly the thunder ceased, the jet of flame sank down, and Marion held to her breast her young daughter, who lay there, pallid, trembling, cold—and naked as when she had come into the world, a helpless babe.

"Throw your mantle over me, and then I will be safe and all your own," feebly said Alice.

The mother did so, taking off some of her own clothes and wrapping her child close. Then all the eldritch sounds died away in the distance; the light broadened across the moor, and all the earth lay in the stillness and freshness of day-break.

Marion and her daughter sank down together, and leaning against the fir tree's bole, kissed one another and wept. Suddenly in one of the topmost branches was heard the twitter of a waking bird.

"It is a' true, and ye're my ain—thanks be to the gude God!" cried Marion, in a choking voice. "Let us arise, my dochter, and gae hame thegither."

Across the yet dark fields they took their way, the mother leaning on Alice's arm. They passed through the silent town o' Melrose, where all were still, fast asleep—tired fathers resting after their work, and mothers lying with their little children round. But there was never a mother like this mother!

Not a creature they met in all the street, or beyond it, until they came to their own door. Then, creeping along the side of the byre, Marion Learmont saw something which seemed through the misty morning-light to be a human form, all fluttering in gaudy-colored rags. And a cracked voice, that might have been sweet when young, and still had a kind of wild pathos, startled her by its old familiar sounds, now unheard for many years. It sang a fragment of meaningless rhyme, which yet had a certain method in it:

"Simmer and winter baith gae round,
Spak the mither wren to her bairnies three;
Tint was tint, and found is found,
I'll hap my heid saft in my ain countrie."

"It's Daft Simmie came back, him that was hunted far and near for stealing my bairn. He's at his sangs again. Wonderfu' are the ways o' the Lord!"

And her thoughts went back to old times, remembering how all things had worked together for good, until her heart was mute for very thankfulness.

As her feet touched the doorsill, the sun rose upon the earth; she turned a minute to gaze at the brightening abbey tower and the three summits Eildon Hill, and all the land around, wakening up into the glory of a new day. Then she looked at Alice, who stood near, her unearthly beauty chastened into that which was merely human—the loveliness of love itself.

"My ain bairn, my ae dochter! that was dead and is alive again—was lost and found?" cried Marion, falling on her neck.

She rested there a little space, then took her daughter's hand, and with great joyfulness they went together into the house.

THE END.

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